

# 1 Handloom Weaving in Assam Problems and Prospects

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## 6 **Abstract**

7 The Handloom sector plays a very important role in India's economy. It is a part of our  
8 culture and heritage and one of the largest economic activities after agriculture having the  
9 capacity of absorbing a greater number of manpower. In 2009-101 this sector provides direct  
10 employment to over 65 lakhs persons in India of which 60.40

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## 12 **Index terms—**

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15 The Handloom sector plays a very important role in India's economy. It is a part of our culture and heritage  
16 and one of the largest economic activities after agriculture having the capacity of absorbing a greater number  
17 of manpower. In 2009-10 1 this sector provides direct employment to over 65 lakhs persons in India of which  
18 60.40% are women. This sector contributes nearly 19% of the total cloth produced in the country and also adds  
19 substantially to export earnings. The ratio of handloom to power loom in terms of cloth in 2009-10 was 1:5.55.

20 In India, Commercial looms formed 38.56% of the total looms owned, while 61.44% of the total looms  
21 were domestic looms. Of the looms in working order 40.90% looms were engaged for commercial purpose  
22 while 59.10% were used as domestic looms i.e., production of these looms was for personal consumption of  
23 the household. Moreover, out of the total weavers 47.51% are full time weavers and out of them 60% worked  
24 independently, 15% in cooperative societies, 18% under master weavers and the rest under private owners, state  
25 khadi and village industries. Moreover, weavers households were found to worked for 197 days in a year in India.

26 The reservoir of handloom skills is concentrated in the North-Eastern states of India, who together account  
27 for 16.83 lakh (60.5%) handloom households out of the total 27.83 lakh units engaged in the Country 2 . Assam  
28 alone accounts for 12.41 lakh (44.6%) handloom households, whereas Manipur and Tripura have 1.79 lakh (6.4%)  
29 and 1.21 lakh (4.3%) such households, respectively. However, only 13.4% of the commercial looms of the country  
30 are in NEI and their contribution to the country's total production of handloom fabrics is merely 20%. In  
31 2009-10, a total of 1403484 weavers are found engaged in this profession in Assam of whom 147042 are full time  
32 weavers while 1256442 are parttime weavers 3 Author : Gargaon College . E-mail : drrajuphukan@yahoo.con  
33 Handloom weaving has an overwhelming presence in the socio-economic life of Assam since time immemorial.  
34 The loom is a prizes possession and has been a way of life in the state. As one of the oldest and largest industry  
35 it is known equally for its pristine simplicity and unequalled charm. The techniques of weaving are handed  
36 down over generations, allusions to that are available in Assamese literature and scriptures. Assam's handloom  
37 industry is basically silk-oriented. The salubrious climate of Assam is suitable for sericigenous flora and fauna.  
38 The most prominent and prestigious being muga, the golden silk. Muga silk is not only sensuous and beautiful  
39 but also strong and durable. Assam's golden silk is obtained from the caterpillar; *Anthereaassama* Westwood.  
40 Widely distributed and cultured in the Brahmaputra valley, the silk worm is multivoltine and non-hibernating.  
41 As many as 260707 families are associated with sericulture in Assam in 2009-10 4 . Out of these families the  
42 highest 8902 families are involved in muga culture followed by 7623 and 4704 families respectively in "eri" and  
43 mulberry culture. The "eri" (Non-mulberry) silk is used in manufacture of warm clothes for winter.

44 According to tradition, the skill to weave was the primary qualification of a young girl for her eligibility for  
45 marriage. This perhaps explains why Assam has the largest concentration of handlooms and weavers in India.

46 The spinning and weaving activities were popularized and became an indispensable profession of every  
47 Assamese household during the days of Ahomregime (1228-1826). The weaving of cloth was not considered

48 as a degraded profession; rather it was practiced by the Brahmins and lower castes irrespective of their social  
49 status 5 . Momai Tamuli Barbaruah, a minister of King Pratap Singha (1603-1641) made it an obligatory duty for  
50 every household to spin and weave.

51 There were many looms under the supervision of Royal house, called 'Rajagharia looms' for producing special  
52 types of silk fabrics for the use of the members of the Royal family. Such Royal looms were operated by expert  
53 female weavers drawn from various places of Assam. Such weavers received grant of rent-free land and other  
54 favours in return for their services. These Royal looms were not sufficient enough to fulfill the requirements of  
55 the Royal family; therefore, skilled weavers from outside the palace were appreciated for supplying good quality  
56 silk fabrics to the Royal house. It is learnt from the historical records that for supplying silk fabric to the Royal  
57 Family, grants of lands were conferred upon the weavers 6 .

58 The Ahom kings created a separate administrative machinery to look after the silkworm rearing, reeling of silk  
59 yarn & weaving of silk fabrics. During the reign of 'Dihingia Raja' alias 'Shuhungmung' (1497-1539), the mother  
60 of 'Bhawanipuria Gopal Ata', who was very expert in weaving, was entrusted with the charge of superintending  
61 the twelve score of royal looms 7 .

62 From the historical records it is learnt that, some of the Ahom Queens were also personally involved in  
63 patronising silk industry in Assam. King Siva singha's (1714-1744) consort queens 'Phuleswari', 'Ambika' and  
64 'Sarbeswari' were personally in charge of training the young girls on the art of weaving, as well as looking after  
65 the activities of the royal looms in the palace 8 .

66 A class of people called 'Katomi' or 'Jogis' was famous for spinning and weaving during the Ahom period.  
67 It was also found that 9 weavers known as 'Tantis' and 'Jholas' (Mohammedan weavers) who migrated from  
68 other places of India had started weaving silk fabrics in Assam. During the Reign of 'Jayadhvajasingha' (1648-  
69 1663), Mohammedan experts in embroidery work were brought from Delhi and were established in Assam, which  
70 encouraged Assamese people to learn the art of embroidery for the upliftment of indigenous crafts in Assam 10 .  
71 King Rudrasingha 11 (1696-1714) also brought new ideas, techniques & design of the art of weaving from other  
72 parts of contemporary India through his envoys and encouraged the Assamese weavers to practice those ideas.  
73 These types of encouragement made by the Ahom king gave a boost to the Handloom industry of Assam.

74 Muga silk fabrics were also exported to the hill districts 12 and Countries like Tibet, China and Bhutan 13  
75 where it was much appreciated. The silk cloth was an article of trade in Bengal as well as in the Coromandal  
76 and Malabar Coasts in the early 17th Century.

77 The handloom industry is a rural based cottage industry, where spinning, weaving and other processes were  
78 done only by hand. Therefore, the labour content in pre-weaving and weaving operation is predominant as  
79 compared to mechanical operations. Handloom industry apart from providing one of the basic necessities of life  
80 also plays a pivotal role through its contribution to industrial output, employment generation, and the export  
81 earnings of the country. Export of handloom has, therefore, been identified as a "Thrust Area" for the overall  
82 development of the sector. The Government is exploring the possibility of making optimal use of the resources to  
83 enhance production capabilities of exportable handloom products. The Indian cotton handloom fabrics and made-  
84 ups occupy a place of eminence in the sought-after markets of USA, UK, Germany, France, Sweden, Belgium,  
85 Netherlands, Japan and Australia. The main items exported belong to the segment of home furnishing which  
86 constitutes about 90% of our total handloom exports.

87 Handlooms have an umbilical linkage with various sectors like transportation, financial services, marketing  
88 services, maintenance services, cotton farmers and the rural farm economy and hotels. Many handloom centres  
89 are well known tourist spots, drawing visitors from far places of India and foreign countries as well. Moreover,  
90 Agricultural labour gets employment in handloom sector during the non-agricultural season. The sector has  
91 self-sustaining mechanism, including training for young weavers, irrespective of gender.

92 Handlooms are environment-friendly. A handloom is an independent and autonomous technology. No energy  
93 is required except for the machinery that spins the yarn used. In addition, the way most handloom weavers live  
94 is approximately 1/3 the carbon impact of an average Indian and an average Indian uses approximately 1/16  
95 of the world's resources as an average North American. There are no building or transportation costs because  
96 most looms are set up in the homes of the weavers or within the village and the looms themselves are anywhere  
97 from 20 -100 years old. They even use bicycles to transport materials from village to village. When one examines  
98 a garment by the energy used to produce it, approximately of the energy is used in the weaving of the cloth,  
99 according to the environmental group Earth Pledge it is safe to assume that the reverse is also true. The sector  
100 thus lends itself to sustainable development policies aimed at reduction of negative impacts on environment and  
101 ecology.

102 Handloom can play vital role in the state's economy; proving sustenance to a large section of the people and  
103 at the same time, facilitating economic growth of the region. For this, it is essential to understand the role  
104 of handlooms in its proper perspective. In the rural areas, weaving activities are considered as an additional  
105 household chore to enhance family incomes and thus raise standards of living. Therefore for the economic  
106 upliftment of a large section of the population the development of this sector is of critical importance. In  
107 a recently conducted survey, NABARD has identified handloom along with other 9 sectors for development for  
108 creation of additional employment in the rural areas. If the government extends its support, the tatters handlooms  
109 can transform themselves into engines of rural revitalization.

110 In a study made during 2009-10 among 70 sample weaving centers with 251 looms of Assam, it is found that

111 the production of "Mekhela" (lower part of traditional women apparel) and "Chadar" (upper part of traditional  
112 women apparel) sheet together constitutes 76.64% of the total product produced by the sample centres in the  
113 reference year. The uses of such traditional apparels are not widespread outside Assam. Therefore, the production  
114 is meant mainly for consumption within the state. Other important modern women apparel like "Saree" however  
115 has a great demand throughout the country. But the weavers are interested in catering to the needs of the local  
116 Assamese customers who prefer traditional apparel to modern apparel. So they produced "Saree" in limited  
117 quantity (3.34%), though it has wider market potentials. This indicates that product diversification has not yet  
118 taken place among the handloom weavers of Assam.

119 The actual production of a loom per annum varies depending upon the quality of fabrics, design woven and  
120 regularity of the weavers in attending the looms. The annual average production of a loom producing purely  
121 plain fabric is as high as 516 m<sup>2</sup>, whereas it is only 142.88 m<sup>2</sup> if the loom produces fabric with sophisticated  
122 designs.

123 In weaving, each loom provides direct employment to one weaver. Hence, 251 looms of the 70 manufacturing  
124 units in the entire sample districts provide direct employment to same number of weavers. However, one assistant  
125 (helper) is required between 2 and 3 commercial looms (average 2.5 looms) for preparatory works and also to  
126 assist the weavers in the looms for smooth functioning of the units. In small units, exclusively family members of  
127 the loom owner do the job of assistant. In the entire sample-manufacturing units, 101 hired assistants are found  
128 assisting 251 muga loom weavers in 2009-10. The tender aged boys and girls are generally employed as assistant  
129 on monthly salary basis. The assistant after doing the job for two to three years learn the art of weaving and  
130 then sit in the looms as learner weavers. The learner weavers are also paid on monthly basis.

131 The loom, however, do not remain busy in weaving throughout 360 days. The weavers, specially the hired ones,  
132 go on leave on various occasions such as traditional festival (Bihu), religious festival (Puja), marriage in family,  
133 sickness etc. It is estimated that the working days of a commercial loom is 270 days (9 months). Hence, the  
134 total mandays created by the weavers (both family & hired) and hired assistants is 67770 and 27270 respectively.  
135 The mandays created by family members working as assistants in big or medium units could not be estimated,  
136 as they only occasionally help the weavers.

137 Out of 251 weavers employed in the entire sample units, only 19.52% (49) are family weavers. Out of the total  
138 49 family weavers 40 are female and 9 are male. Since the male are primarily busy in managing the unit, they  
139 cannot get time to weave.

140 As per male: female participation rate in weaving in terms of mandays created by the weavers and assistants is  
141 concerned, it is found that the female dominate the entire sample units with 55.68% of mandays. In "Sualkuchi" of  
142 Kamrup district of Assam, where the commercial weaving centers are highly concentrated, it is more or less equal  
143 (male=50.90%, female=49.10%), while in other areas (non-commercial areas), females are dominant (76.92%).  
144 This is because, weaving is not popular among the male in the noncommercial weaving areas. Out of the total  
145 mandays created by the male hired weavers employed, 93.68% are found in Sualkuchi in 2009-10.

146 It is also found that most of the weavers did not take any formal training for learning the production process  
147 as they learn on-the-job while observing and helping the older family members as well as master weavers. But a  
148 few of them took formal training course at the Government centres for both skilled and ordinary weaving styles.

149 Moreover, in traditional non-commercial areas it was observed that the weavers preferred throw shuttle looms  
150 having low productivity which is easier to operate and also cheap. The weavers due to their poor economic  
151 condition cannot convert their looms to flyshuttle one.

152 The loom owners of Assam are getting a readymade domestic market for their products. But there is no  
153 proper marketing channel for displaying and selling the products outside the state, particularly 'Sarees', which  
154 could get a good market in the national arena.

155 Five distinct categories of market functionaries of handloom fabrics are identified. These are selling fabrics, (i)  
156 directly to the consumers, (ii) to the private silk stores, (iii) to the private peddlers and vendors, (iv) to the sales  
157 centres of Co-operative societies and (v) to the sales centres of Governmental agencies viz. The Assam Apex  
158 Weavers and Artisan Co-operative Federation Limited (ARTFED), the Assam government Marketing Corporation  
159 (AGMC), Khadi and Gramoudyog Board etc. The producers often sell their products to those who offer better  
160 price. Therefore, some manufacturers sell their products to more than one category of market functionaries.

161 Under direct category of sellers the manufacturers sell their fabrics directly to the consumers. Some of them  
162 have their own selling counters for this purpose. Some manufacturers sell in May trade fairs, exhibitions etc.,  
163 and still some more sell directly to the ultimate consumers who visit the manufacturing units for this purpose. It  
164 is found that out of total 100 sample loom owners of Assam, 49 sell a part of their products through these direct  
165 marketing channels. The quantity of fabrics sold through these direct channels has been 9550.61 square metres  
166 (25.17% of the total fabrics of 37944.43 sq.metres produced in 2009-10).

167 The second category of sellers, i.e., Private sellers plays a very crucial role in marketing fabrics. There are  
168 about 100 private silk stores in Sualkuchi itself and numerous such stores are there in other parts of Assam.  
169 Silk-store owners or their representatives from outside Sualkuchi come to Sualkuchi and collect silk fabrics, from  
170 the weaving units. However, sometimes, fabric producers themselves go to the silk-stores for selling silk fabrics.  
171 The silk-stores sometimes order for silk fabric of a specific design as per requirement of the final consumers. It  
172 is also reported that some of the silkstores supply necessary yarn on credit to the poor weavers on the condition

173 that the products would be delivered to them. It is found that 57.57% of the sample producers sell 55.74%  
174 (21150.23 sq. metre) of their products through these stores in 2009-10.

175 The third category of sellers are the peddlers and vendors, who usually collect fabrics from the loom owners  
176 and resell them to the ultimate consumers in different areas of Assam. The operational jurisdiction of each of  
177 them is restricted to a locality, so that there is no competition among them. 27% of the sample producers sell  
178 a part of their products to such vendors who purchase about 13.81% (5240.13 sq.metre) of the total products of  
179 the entire sample units in 2009-10.

180 Only 4% of the sample loom owners sell a part of their products to cooperative societies. Generally, the sales  
181 counters of cooperative societies collect products from their member weavers only, but some time they collect  
182 fabrics from non-members also. The role of cooperative in marketing the products is, however, negligible; they  
183 sell products of about 3% of the workshops in Sualkuchi 14 . During the period under reference, this category of  
184 sellers purchases 0.83% (314.93 sq. metres) of the total products from the sample units.

185 There are two centralized marketing agencies set up by the Government of Assam for marketing products of  
186 the handloom weavers of Assam. The Assam Apex Weavers and Artisan Co-operative Federation Limited and the  
187 Assam government Marketing Corporation, both are registered with Department of Cooperatives, Government of  
188 Assam, for providing marketing support to the weavers and artisans. Both the organizations organize a number  
189 of district, state and national level fairs with cent percent central assistance every year.

190 ARTFED possesses 52 sales counters, one weaving unit in the state and 5 sales counters outside the state (1  
191 each at Kolkota, Delhi, Joypur, Indore & Kanpur). They collect fabrics from some reputed weavers of Sualkuchi.  
192 During the period under reference, ARTFED collects 3.62% (1373.59 sq. metres) of the total annual products  
193 from the sample units. They generally collect plain sheets where the ARTFED designers put designs on for selling  
194 them both in national and international markets. It is to be noted that ARTFED is the only channel through  
195 which handloom products are exported to the USA, the UK, Japan etc., and the products so far exported are  
196 muga quilt, pillow cover, cushion cover, plain sheets, bed cover, curtain etc.

197 AGMC also possesses 14 sales counters for selling handloom and handicrafts product in the state and 3 for  
198 national market (2 at Kolkota& one at Delhi). They also procure fabrics from the reputed master weavers or  
199 manufacturers of Sualkuchi. In 2009-10, AGMC procures 0.83% (314.94 sq. metres) of the total products of the  
200 entire sample units for sale. Thus ARTFED and AGMC together sold 1688.53 sq. metres (4.45%) fabrics of the  
201 entire sample-manufacturing units in 2009-10.

202 The sales counters of 'Khadi and Gramoudyog Board' (56 nos) procure fabrics from their own production  
203 units. There are about a total of 22 production units of 'Khadi and Gramoudyog Board' in Assam.

204 The handloom products of Assam are mainly marketed in the domestic market and a little amount exported  
205 to different part of India as well as Abroad. There is a great demand of Muga plain fabric in Japan for making  
206 their traditional dress called "Kimanu". The main fabrics exported are Plain muga fabrics and design "Saree" of  
207 Muga and Mulberry silk.

208 The Government is exploring the possibility of making optimal use of the resources to enhance production  
209 capabilities of exportable handloom products. A provision of Rs. 26 The foremost requirement would be to cover  
210 weavers with poor education and economic condition in to institutional network like Cooperative. This only help  
211 them to mobilize limited resources, provide avenues for collective action and overcome constraints associated with  
212 size, promote technological development and enhance their ability to compete in the local and global markets.

213 Another most urgent need is to ensure that quality raw materials are available to the weavers to participate  
214 in an evolving market economy and to break out of the subsistence production cycle. It is found that most of  
215 weavers are unaware of the latest designs. The weavers are producing fabrics of obsolete design, no link to seasonal  
216 fashion forecasts, the looms has hardly changed leading to low productivity and overpriced fabrics, no change in  
217 product profile, low value addition resulting in subsisting wages, weavers are dependents on master weavers and  
218 there is no rewards for innovations and little opportunity to develop entrepreneurship. Therefore there is always  
219 remaining a gap between the design preference of the consumer and the designs produced by the weavers.

220 Adaptation of various ethnic designs and styles to contemporary fashions and needs can open a new vista for  
221 the sector that can even have global dimensions. The impact of globalization has been seen in the handloom  
222 industry of the state. In the backdrop of rural unemployment, new opportunities for employment in rural areas  
223 will have to be largely in the nonagricultural sector like handloom weaving. Training should provide in two ways:  
224 training to produce new designs and operate the upgrade looms. During the training period the weavers should  
225 be paid stipend to compensate the loss of wages during the training period.

226 A number of schemes also have been taken up by the Govt. of Assam which aim at providing weavers for  
227 production of quality fabrics, modernization of looms, creation of commercial motivation amongst the weavers,  
228 extension of training facilities, development of textile design etc. the no of beneficiaries (weavers) under Central  
229 Sector and Centrally Sponsored Scheme and Programme was 20918 and the total expenditure incurred were Rs.  
230 As a part of product diversification, the Govt. promoted organization for silk that will be used for making Jeans.  
231 According to Chairman of Central Silk Board (CSB), Govt. of India, the CSB has also developed fabrics that  
232 will be used for making every day wear T-Shirts other than "Saree"s and women's dress material. The CSB has  
233 been trying to revamp the image that Indian silk is often associated with women's wear and is meant for rich and  
234 well-to-do. In a move towards product diversification, the CSB have introduced a slew of items like carry bags  
235 and visiting cards made out of soft yarn, due to recession, the demand for Indian silk has gone down drastically

236 and exports have fallen by Rs.1000 crore in the last one year. Cheap Chinese silk is giving stiff competition to  
237 Indian Silk in the International and National market. Chinese textile products are 10-20 percent cheaper than  
238 Indian ones.

239 The Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of Assam has taken an initiative to promote the "Silk Mark", an official mark  
240 on items made of silk, on the lines of "Hallmark" for precious metals and "Wool mark" for woolen products in  
241 order to differentiate pure silk from fake silk. These steps will not only help to promote Indian Silk but also help  
242 to beat the double whammy of the economic slowdown and slump in demand.

243 For upliftment of handloom sector it is most essential to identify the problems faced by this industry. Poor  
244 marketing and insufficient market linkage outside the state ails the industry from growing and earning more  
245 revenue. Apart from other, innovations in design to cope up with the latest market demand are not sufficient  
246 and have posed a threat to this indigenous industry. Therefore, it is high time that all round efforts are made to  
revive this important and unique industry. <sup>1 2 3 4 5 6</sup>



Figure 1:

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<sup>2</sup>Handloom Weaving in Assam: Problems and Prospects

<sup>3</sup>P.Baisya, The Silk Industry of Assam, Spectrum publications, Guwahati:Delhi, 2005, p.118.

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