

**STUDY OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOMEN  
ENGAGED IN HANDLOOM WEAVING AND MEASURES  
FOR ENHANCING THEIR SUSTAINABILITY**

**Neera Barooah**\*

**Ela M. Dedhia**\*\*

**ABSTRACT**

Craft of handloom weaving is an exclusive preserve of the women of Assam, the north eastern state of India; perhaps this is one sector, where women are involved in both production and marketing. The objective of the study was to capture socio-economic status of women weavers in Assam and also to identify the measures that would enhance sustainability of handloom industry in broad perspective.

The study covered women handloom weavers from three categories namely, independent weavers; government financed weavers and weavers employed in factories. Workshops were conducted with each group of weavers to demonstrate measures such as value addition, product diversification to enhance their sustainability.

The study revealed that majority of weavers had low level of education. Economic contribution enabled them a place in the decision making process within the family as well as in the society. The weavers, across all the categories were open to implement the suggestions to enhance their sustainability. The study found majority of the handloom weavers live in poverty below poverty line facing severe livelihood crisis. Proper interventions in the areas of exposure to the Government schemes, skill and

---

\* Associate Professor, Department of Textiles & Apparel Designing, S.V.T. College of Home Science (Autonomous)

\*\* Head & Associate Professor, Department of Textiles & Fashion Technology, Nirmala Niketan College of Home Science, Mumbai, India

design development, raw material, up gradation of production and marketing process will certainly elevate the socio-economic condition of the weavers and enhance sustainability of their profession. Handloom being labour intensive, less cost effective (as compared to power looms), hand-woven products alone cannot become economically viable in today's competitive market unless there is value addition, product diversification to justify the value of a hand-woven product.

Key words: Employed weavers, Government financed weavers, Independent weaver, Product diversification, women weavers, value addition.

## INTRODUCTION

The handloom industry has a long tradition of craftsmanship in India and plays an important role in economy of the country as well as in preserving country's cultural heritage. As an economic activity, the handloom industry occupies a place second only to agriculture. The handloom sector provides employment mainly in rural areas for an estimated 4.3 million (as per 3<sup>rd</sup> Handloom census 2009-10) people, generating jobs also in semi-urban and urban areas out of which, 62.40 percent are women and 35 percent from scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. In its 48<sup>th</sup> Report, Parliamentary standing committee of Government of India on Textiles says that "this unorganized sector provides livelihood to millions of weavers and craft person" (Reddy, N., 2010). Assam, the north-eastern state of India presents a unique picture with respect to the handloom and textile sector providing an opportunity for the generations of additional income to a large number of rural and tribal folk.

Craft of weaving is an exclusive preserve of the women of Assam, who starts her training in the craft even before she reaches her teens. Perhaps this is one sector, where women are involved in production as well as marketing of their products, as workers and as participants in commercialized domestic textile production, and as master weavers. In the north-eastern states of India, there are about 15, 00,000 household handlooms. Weaving fabric in handlooms is a way of life for a large number of tribal and rural

artisans. It is known far and wide for its rich textures and designs; in fact, the state of Assam, even boasts of having the largest number of weavers and handlooms in the whole of India (Chakravarty, 2010). The Assamese women folk are best known for their handwork and aesthetic designs, which they perceive in their mind and demonstrate in their craftsmanship. Even though, indigenous weavers have such skill and potential, weaving is still considered only as a traditional craft and many women weavers have not adopted the craft of weaving as a profession (Majumdar, 2001:43).

The literature review suggests very few studies have been done in areas related to handloom industry and more so, about the women handloom weavers. Behl, M. (2009) in her study on “Women's Collectives in Assam” analyzes the nature of women's work, their organizational abilities and found that rural women's lives in Assam have indicated instances of greater mobility in their work pattern and social position. An interesting feature of intra-household power nexus in various communities such as the Karbi, Bodo, Kacharis, Mishings and the Assamese is the relative autonomy that women enjoy with regard to their incomes and handloom weaving is one major source income generation. Singh, A.et.al. (2007) attempted to understand the Banaras handloom weavers' socio-economic condition, marketing practices and problems faced by them. Their study found that handloom industry in Banaras survived mainly on its aesthetics, uniqueness and craftsmanship. The study results revealed that the situations of weavers were pathetic; they were feeble due to illiteracy, financial constraints, marketing bottleneck and lack of government support. A study done by Centre for Handloom Information and Policy Advocacy (2006), brought out the problems being faced by women weavers in Andhra Pradesh found that many women weavers suffer from poverty and ill health. Although, women constitute 65% of the work force in the handloom sector, there is no welfare scheme that addresses this segment. Moreover, they are not aware of other existing schemes due to their illiteracy. The study found the reason for such status of women weavers due to exclusion from the following- decision making position in the household, participation in trade negotiation, finalizing trade agreements, access to raw material, wage determination and improving work conditions. A comprehensive investigation was made by Krishna, K. (2000) to understand the

impact of government development programmes, under Handloom and Textiles, on the socio-economic status of the weavers of Assam and found that the socio-economic status of the beneficiary group was higher than the non-beneficiary group. Only a small percentage of weavers had high level of awareness about these schemes. The problems like irregular supply of raw material, low wages of the weavers, absence of proper monitoring and supervision and lack of consideration of the market trend in production of woven articles were found to be some of the problems faced by respondents. Further, illiteracy, lack of enthusiastic leaders was reported as the constraints faced by the weavers. In view of the limited studies done on handloom weavers in certain parts of India and other contemporary studies on handloom industries, there is no clear picture of their socio-economic status and their struggle for sustainability in the face of massive competition of handloom products with cheaper mill made products.

#### **Objectives of the study:**

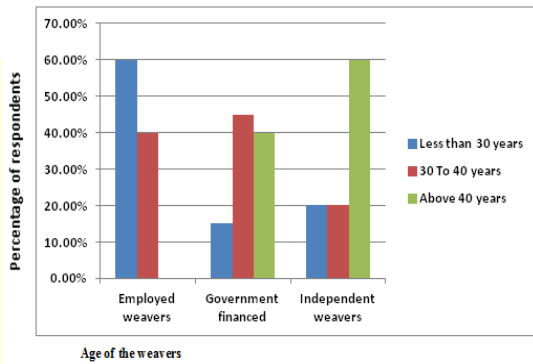
The overall objective of the study was to capture socio-economic status of different categories of weavers engaged in handloom weaving in Assam with reference to level of literacy, age structure, marital status, means of livelihood, occupational pattern, weaving income as well as gender relationship within the family and their status in the society and also to identify the measures that would enhance sustainability of handloom industry in broad perspective.

#### **METHOD**

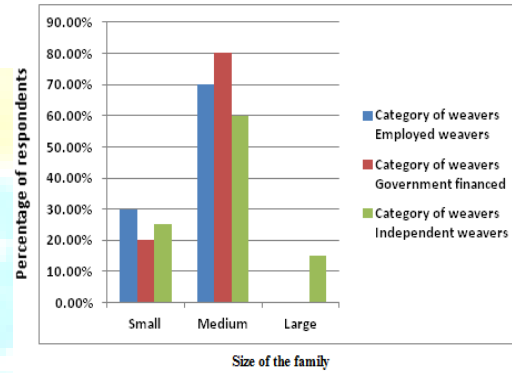
Based on the purpose, the study followed a descriptive pattern by adopting an interview schedule to gain information from the respondents. There are about 1.26 million handloom weavers in Assam (Begum R.A., 2009). Many of these weavers are part of cooperative societies, worker in factories, work at home or do job work. The study covered 30 weavers from Mishing tribe as government financed weavers; these weavers get financed from government in terms of the handloom and yarns for weaving, 30 weavers from Rabha tribe as independent weavers and 30 weavers from a weaving factory, where they weave eight hours a day on handloom with jacquard attachment. Pertinent data was gathered through the use of

interview schedule to elicit information. Workshops were conducted with each group of weavers to demonstrate measures such as value addition, product diversification to enhance their sustainability.

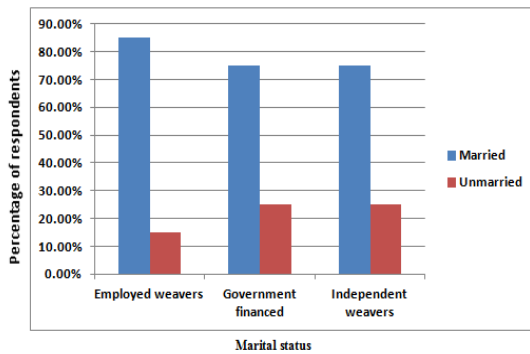
**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:**



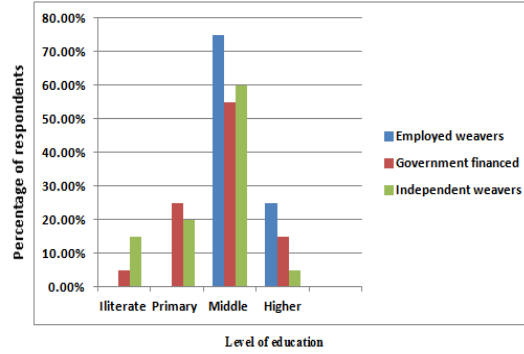
**Fig. 1. Age of weavers**



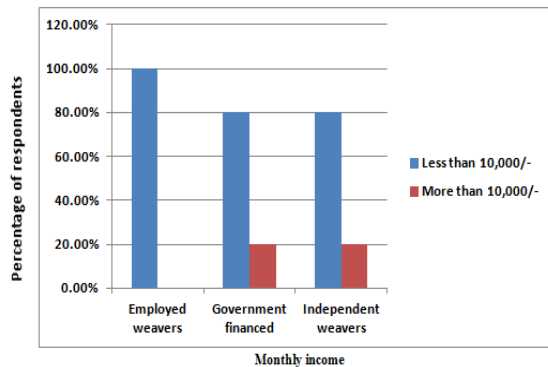
**Fig. 2. Size of family of weavers**



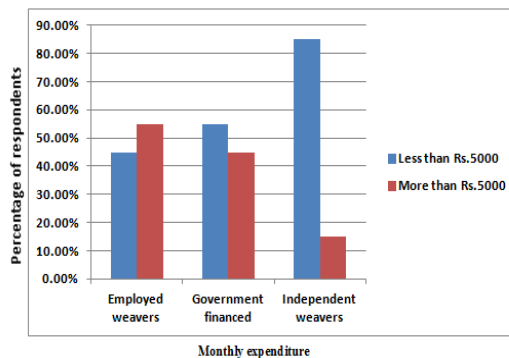
**Fig. 3. Marital status of weavers**



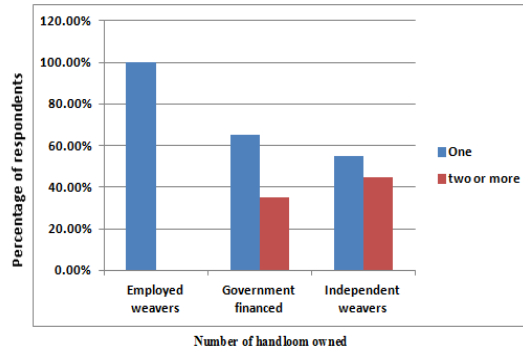
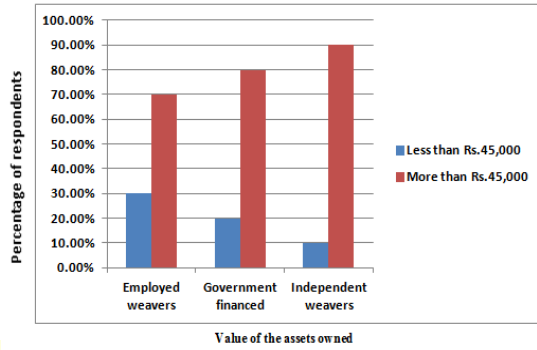
**Fig. 4. Level of education of weavers**



**Fig. 5. Monthly income of weavers**



**Fig. 6. Monthly expenditure of weavers**



**Fig.7. Value of the assets owned**

**Fig. 8. Number of handloom owned**

In the personal profile of the weavers, age, type of family, size of the family, religion, caste, marital status, level of education, monthly income, monthly expenditure were studied.

Generally, a weaver enters the weaving profession or starts weaving related activities at an early age of 10-15 years and continues weaving till she retires in an organized sector; however, an independent weaver might continue these activities throughout her life until she becomes unable to perform physically. The study revealed majority of the respondents belonged to the age group of 30-40 years cutting across all the categories of the weavers (Fig. 1).



**Plate 1. Handloom weaver of Assam**



**Plate 2. A tribal weaver weaving on a loom set below the stilt house**

The standard of living to some extent depends on the size of family as well as on number of earning members. Majority of the weavers of all categories live in joint family systems consisting of a medium sized family of 4-8 members and again the majority of them were found to be married (Fig. 2).

A socio-economic study will be incomplete if the level of education is not studied. An educated weaver may bring dynamic changes in the method of production as well as marketing. Regarding the educational level of the weavers, the study indicated majority of the weavers to have education up to the tenth standard (Fig. 4). However, illiteracy is found to be high among the independent weavers and probably, this has led to their lack of awareness regarding the existence of government welfare schemes.

The monthly income and expenditure are good indicator of economic condition and standard of living of weavers' families. The monthly income and expenditure are good indicators of economic condition and standard of living of weavers' family. Monthly income majority of all categories of weavers was found to be less than Rs.10, 000/- (USD 167.00) per month (Fig. 5). Part of this family income is supplemented by the weaving income for each category of weavers. However, the weaving income is highest among the employed weaver and this is being reflected in their monthly expenditure pattern (Fig. 6).

The study found similarities across all categories of weavers with respect to the type of family, marital status, monthly income of the family, value of assets owned by the family (Fig.7); however a difference existed in age, caste, educational level, number of handloom owned (Fig. 8) by the family, number of family members involved in weaving etc.

### **Business profile of the weavers**

Any business consists of various types of activities; as far as textiles production activities are concerned, these activities consist of spinning, weaving, dyeing, finishing and marketing of the products. However, spinning is confined only to certain communities and certain localities. Cotton is not grown any more locally in Assam; eri silk-culture and muga silk-culture and silk spinning is mostly localized to tribal areas. The present study found that the independent weavers practice muga-culture and spinning of

muga silk yarn, however, they don't use these yarns for weaving, and instead get premium price by selling these yarns. Use of cotton and acrylic yarn is prevalent across independent and government financed category of weavers. Dyeing using natural dyes is another textile activity, which is very currently very rarely practiced. Marketing is carried out only by the independent weavers by selling their product either in cash or credit in the domestic market. As far as gender involved in various textile manufacturing units, most of the activities such as spinning, weaving, are carried out by women, with the exception of marketing. A weaver's family generally owns one or two looms for weaving. Since, these weavers have other household responsibilities as well, majority of the weavers weave only about one to one and half meters of fabric daily on an average, however. Slightly higher productivity is seen only in case of employed weavers. Children, across all categories of weavers get involved in the weaving related activities from very tender age of 10 to 15 years. There is no awareness about checking the quality of the woven product, thereby hampering them from entering into competitive market.

Earlier, weavers used to weave fabric for the entire clothing requirement of the family. As the present study reveals, currently, these weavers weave traditional costumes of each of the communities apart from certain common costume of the local Assamese community, however, employed category of weavers weave as per requirement of their employer.

Considering, monthly income of the families of weavers, monthly expenditure, monthly weaving income as well as considering the value of the assets own by a weaver's family for all the categories of weavers, it appears that the weavers' families live in poverty. However, present study found that all the weavers' families cutting across their category, own mobile phones and majority of them own television sets and consider them as a necessity for modern life.



**Social status and gender relation:**

For many of the weavers' families, weaving income provides a basis for their family's survival to a certain extent. The economic contribution has afforded these weavers much higher status in the family and thereby enabling them a place in the decision making process of the family. This has further led to equitable gender relationship within the family as well as in the society.

**Measures to enhance sustainability of handloom loom industry:**

Each group of weavers were receptive to the ideas exhibited during the workshop in terms of value addition by using fancy yarns along with conventional yarns, product development, and development of diversified products along with conventional products with aggressive marketing strategies to enhance sustainability of their profession. They were explained that in handloom, because the labour input is more irrespective of raw material used, the production value is the most important for the sustainability. It is obvious that it cannot have sustainability by producing for example, Rs. 150.00 (USD 2.50) worth goods and taking home even 50% margin (Rs. 75.00 or USD 1.25) against the labour. Output per unit of effort needs to be understood as production of high valued goods is the key to the sustainability.

**Sustainability by value addition, product development & product diversification:**

Out of the four aspects of sustainability (Economical, social, cultural and environmental), economic sustainability is the core, which means using resources to provide necessary and desirable products and services for the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same.

Based on per capita income of Rs. 60000.00 (USD 1000), minimum earning per month per person (adult) should be Rs. 5000.00 (USD 83.00) or Rs. 200.00 (USD 3.33) per day. Study reveals that majority of the weaver's live under below poverty level (BPL), which is a big challenge in the handloom sector for its sustainability. The traditional practices of producing handloom fabric or

made-ups in a conventional way are no way sustainable. Newer approach is needed towards resource optimization for better earning through proper selection of products that adds maximum value.

For example-

**Table 1. Example of Value addition / earning potential by products**

Particulars	Product type	
	Normal	High Value but low productive
Raw material cost / Lm (Rs)	(USD 1.67) 100.00	(USD 1.67) 100.00
Production rate (Lm/day)	3	1.5
Minimum wage per weaver (Rs)	(USD 3.33) 200.00	(USD 3.33) 200.00
Wage / Lm (Rs)	(USD 1.11) 66.7	(USD 2.22) 133.00
Sale price / Lm in Rs (Raw material cost x 2)	(USD 3.33) 200.00	(USD 10.00) 600.00
Wage component on sale price %	33.3	22
Direct contribution / Lm	133.3	467
Direct contribution / day	(USD 6.67) 400.00	(USD 11.67) 700.00
Value addition %	50	83

**Note: 1USD = Rs60.00**

Economic need is the core of sustainability. ‘The entire weaving industry pivots around the performance of the female weaver and it is for her labour that the industry still thrives.’ (Begum, 2009:39).

---

**SUMMARY & CONCLUSION**

Handloom is an integral part of cultural heritage of India. As an economic activity, handloom occupies a major place after agriculture in providing employment to people. Handloom weaving is a household profession for many families passed on from generation to generation. Women weavers of Assam have contributed substantially towards the income of the family. Due to their participation in economic activities, these women weavers face fewer gender specific obstacles than their counterparts in certain other parts of India. Their participation in the decision making process of the family and society indicates that women handloom weavers are more liberated. Hence, handloom sector can be considered as ideal for women's economic activities.

With the type of design and crafts present in the handloom industry of Assam, it can become a potential sector for domestic as well as for export market. From the study of the various aspect of the socio-economic condition of the weavers, it can be concluded that majority of the weavers live in poverty. Low level of education is another reason for lack of awareness and knowledge of the development taking place around and availability of various state and central government sponsored schemes. In spite of being connected to the culture of the state, handloom sector is still not flourishing in the state (NEDFi: 2010). Proper interventions in the areas of raw material, design development, up gradation of production and marketing process will certainly enhance the sustainability of handloom industry.

**Recommendation to enhance sustainability:**

It may be suggested to the local/state government that –

1. Exposure may be given to the women weavers to handloom industries of other states of India, where weaving is a profession unlike Assam, specially to stages such as:

- i. Pre-loom for yarn dyeing, warping.
  - ii. On-loom
  - iii. Post-loom.
2. Effort must be made to improve the level of education among the weavers across their category.

3. Improved technique of fabric production also may be introduced with emphasis on value addition, product development and product diversification.

4. Government intervention through financial assistance and implementation of various developmental and welfare schemes to enhance the sustainability of handloom sector to face the challenges that come on their way.

#### References

1. Begum, R.A. (2009). *Dreams that our women Weaves*. Guwahati: R.A. publication, 39.
2. Chakravarty, R., Dutta, P. & Ghose, J. (2010). Sericulture and Traditional Craft of weaving in Assam: *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, 39(2), 378-385
3. Singh, A. & Naik, S. (2009). Status of Banaras Weavers: A profile. *Karnataka Journal of Agricultural Science*, 22(2), 408-411.
4. Reddy, N. (n.d.) Weaving woes on Handloom. Retrieved 15.9.2010 from <http://www.indiatogether.org/2006/feb/eco-handloom.htm>.
5. Behl, M. (2009). Women's Activism and challenges faced in Contemporary Assam. Retrieved 21.9.201 from <http://www.northeastnetwork.org>.
6. Majumdar, L. (2001). Status of Textile Tradition in Assam. *Sesarun- Journal of Directorate of Research, Arunachal Pradesh*, (27), 43-47.

7. Handloom and Textiles in Assam. *NEDFi Data Bank*. Retrieved 12. 8.2012 from  
<http://db.nedfi.com/content/handloom-textile-assam>

#### 8. Unpublished material

Sharma, K. & Majumdar, L. (2001) “A Study of the Impact of Development Programme Under handloom and Textiles on the Socio-Economic Status of the Indigenous Weavers in Assam”, Unpublished PhD Doctoral Dissertation, Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat, Assam.

**Note:** This paper was presented at the International Conference on Enhancing Health, Well-being & Sustainability—Opportunities, Challenges & Future Directions (2013), organized by Nirmala Niketan College of Home Science, Mumbai University, Mumbai, India.