

From Cocoon to Loom: A Qualitative Analysis of Skill Deficits, Changing Livelihoods and Prospects for Youth Entrepreneurship in Sericulture and Weaving Continuum of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Assam has a centuries-old tradition of sericulture and handloom weaving that represents both cultural heritage and complex livelihood system sustaining millions of rural households across the Brahmaputra Valley. This study examines the deepening skill deficit in the cocoon-to-loom continuum among youth in Golaghat and Jorhat districts of Assam. The study draws on in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and field observations with 48 respondents comprising weavers, sericulture farmers, and youth and government officials. The study critically analyses how structural forces including modernisation, changing education systems, competitive labour markets and social transformation are eroding intergenerational transmission of traditional skills. Bourdieu's theory of Cultural Capital and the Capability Approach of Amartya Sen, and drawing additionally on Bhowmick's (2025) concepts of policy fatigue, the politics of fatigue, aesthetic disruption, green tokenism and everyday resistance helped build the foundation. The findings reveal that while raw knowledge of sericulture and weaving persists at the household level, it is rapidly becoming de-contextualized and commercially unviable. Government data from the Office of the Development Commissioner for Handlooms and the Assam Sericulture Department confirm declining active workforce participation in these sectors. However, significant entrepreneurial potential exists among educated youth if academic institutions and policy mechanisms create enabling environments free from performative governance. The paper argues that revitalizing the cocoon-to-loom continuum requires a pedagogically integrated and policy-backed approach that goes beyond aesthetic disruption to transform traditional skill into contemporary livelihood.

Keywords: Skill Deficit, Youth Entrepreneurship, Assam, Traditional Livelihood, Cultural Capital, Policy Fatigue, Green Tokenism, Everyday Resistance

Introduction

Assam is home to three distinct varieties of indigenous silk, namely Muga, Eri and Pat, and its handloom sector employs approximately 16.8 lakh weavers, constituting nearly 70 per cent of all handloom workers in the northeast region (Ministry of Textiles, 2020). Sericulture sits at the upstream end of a value chain that culminates in the iconic Mekhela Chador and Gamusa on the

loom. This cocoon-to-loom continuum represents not only an economic process but a cultural biography of Assamese identity.

Yet this rich inheritance is under severe stress. The Fourth Economic Census (2019) noted a significant decline in household-level participation in artisanal activities across Assam, with the handloom and sericulture sectors experiencing what development practitioners have begun to describe as a skills recession.* The Assam Sericulture Department Annual Report (2022-23) recorded a drop in the number of active silkworm rearers from approximately 2.3 lakh in 2010 to about 1.6 lakh in 2022, signaling a generational exit from the practice. This gap of human capital from these sectors is not incidental; it is the product of intersecting structural forces including the expansion of formal education, growing aspirations for salaried employment, migration patterns and the cultural devaluation of manual and weaving occupations.

The study is conducted in Golaghat and Jorhat districts, two of the most historically significant sites of Muga silk cultivation and weaving, examines these dynamics through a qualitative lens. It interrogates the nature and causes of the skill deficit, maps changing livelihood trajectories and explores the prospects for youth entrepreneurship if skill revitalization is pursued through academic and institutional channels. The central argument is that the decline of sericulture and weaving skills among youth is not inevitable but a consequence of structural neglect, and that targeted pedagogical and policy interventions can reverse this trajectory.

Critically, this paper also attends to the manner in which state interventions themselves have become part of the problem. Drawing on Bhowmick's (2025) conceptual apparatus of policy fatigue and the politics of fatigue,† the study examines how the repetitive deployment of superficially designed schemes, uncritically celebrated under a sustainability banner, has generated not only fatigue among beneficiaries but a form of green tokenism that substitutes aesthetic disruption for substantive structural change. This critical dimension, largely absent from prior studies of the sector, constitutes a key contribution of the present work.

This study is theoretically grounded in three complementary frameworks: Pierre Bourdieu's concept of Cultural Capital, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and the emerging critical framework developed by Bhowmick (2025) in relation to policy fatigue, aesthetic disruption and everyday resistance in development contexts.

The first framework where Bourdieu (1986) conceptualised cultural capital as the accumulated cultural knowledge, skills and education confers social status and power. In the context of Assam's weaving communities, the embodied cultural capital constituted by skill in sericulture and handloom has historically served as the primary site of social reproduction and livelihood. The apprenticeship model, where daughters learned to weave from their mothers and sons accompanied their fathers to sericulture fields, constituted a deeply embedded form of cultural transmission that required no formal institution.

Bourdieu's concept of the field is equally instructive here. The social field of handloom weaving in Assam is undergoing fundamental restructuring as market competition from power looms and synthetic fabrics, combined with the prestige economy of formal education has systematically devalued traditional weaving skills. Young weavers who might once have apprenticed in weaving now seek to convert their cultural capital into academic credentials, entering schooling systems that rarely incorporate knowledge of weaving. The result is a double dispossession: the young acquire credentials but not livelihoods, while the old possess skills but lack market access (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).‡

*The term 'skills recession' has entered development discourse in South and Southeast Asia to describe not merely a quantitative shortage of trained workers but a qualitative erosion of craft competencies that are structurally embedded in community and household life. Unlike conventional skill gaps arising from technological displacement, a skills recession in artisanal sectors typically involves the simultaneous loss of embodied knowledge, its transmission infrastructure and the cultural prestige that makes its acquisition attractive to the young.

†It should be noted that Bhowmick (2025) focuses specifically on the Sualkuchi handloom cluster in Kamrup district, which is a geographically and historically distinct site from the Golaghat-Jorhat study area of the present research. The conceptual framework developed therein is applied here in an extended empirical context, enabling a cross-cluster analytical dialogue within the Assamese handloom economy.

‡The formulation 'double dispossession' draws on but extends Bourdieu's own language. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) describe educational systems as sites of 'symbolic violence' that misrecognise cultural capital by rendering certain forms of knowledge, particularly

The second framework is of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach that offers a complementary lens by focusing on what people are actually able to do and be. Sen (1999) argues that development must be evaluated by the expansion of real freedoms, or capabilities, that people have reason to value. Applied to the weavers and sericulture farmers of Golaghat and Jorhat, the framework reveals a paradox: while material conditions have marginally improved through government schemes, the substantive capability to practice one's traditional weaving, earn a dignified livelihood from it and transmit it to the next generation is sharply contracting. Nussbaum's (2011) elaboration of central human capabilities further points to the non-economic dimensions of what is lost when a weaving tradition declines.

A third and critically generative framework for this study is drawn from Bhowmick's (2025) conceptualisation of policy fatigue and what she terms the politics of fatigue in the context of development interventions in marginalised communities. This work focuses on the Sualkuchi handloom cluster and applicable across Assam's weaving economy theorizes how iterative policy cycles, particularly those deployed under the rubric of sustainability and green development, produce a specific form of governance exhaustion among recipient communities.[§] Beneficiaries, subjected to successive waves of training workshops, awareness campaigns and scheme enrolments that fail to alter underlying structural conditions, develop a habituated skepticism towards institutional promises. This is not mere disengagement; it is a sociologically legible response to what Bhowmick (2025) identifies as the performative character of development governance.

Crucially, Bhowmick (2025) introduces the concept of aesthetic disruption to describe interventions that alter the surface appearance of a problem by rebranding schemes as green, sustainable or heritage enterprises without dismantling the structural hierarchies that produce disadvantage in the first place. In the domain of handloom and sericulture policy in

Assam, this aesthetic disruption is clearly visible: exhibition stalls, digital branding initiatives and GI-tagged product launches generate considerable publicity while leaving unchanged the income levels, market access and skill support available to grassroots weavers. Bhowmick (2025) further argues that Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and mapping technologies, deployed widely under sustainability frameworks, risk reproducing hierarchies of power rather than democratizing them, since the cartographic authority of such systems typically resides with the state or external agencies rather than weaving communities themselves.**

The counterpart to institutional performativity, in Bhowmick's (2025) framework, is everyday resistance, which refers to the subtle practices through which marginalised actors negotiate and partially subvert the impositions of policy regimes. In the present study, this is observed in weavers selectively engaging with government training while protecting undisclosed traditional techniques, in youth performing scheme compliance while privately pursuing alternative livelihood strategies, and in community knowledge networks that operate outside the institutional gaze. These three concepts, namely policy fatigue, aesthetic disruption and everyday resistance, provide the critical vocabulary to analyse the power relations embedded in the sector's governance.

Together, Bourdieu's cultural capital, Sen's capabilities and Bhowmick's critical politics of fatigue enable the study to situate the erosion of the cocoon-to-loom continuum within a broader crisis of cultural reproduction, capability deprivation and structural exclusion that demands both sociological and policy attention.

working-class and artisanal knowledge, illegitimate. The double dispossession theorised here adds a livelihood dimension: the young weaver or sericulture farmer who abandons the craft for formal education acquires neither the full economic returns that formal credentials do not promise nor the livelihood security that craft practice once provided.

[§]The concept of policy fatigue in Bhowmick (2025) is distinguished from the related concept of 'initiative fatigue' in public administration literature by its focus on the fatigue experienced by target communities rather than by implementing bureaucracies. Whereas initiative fatigue describes the exhaustion of officials required to implement successive policy reforms, policy fatigue as theorised by Bhowmick describes the exhaustion and the resulting strategic disengagement of communities subjected to those reforms.

** Critical GIS scholarship has extensively documented the tendency of spatial data collection exercises to reproduce the territorial logics of the commissioning agency rather than the lived geographies of mapped communities (see Pavlovskaya, 2006; Elwood, 2006). In the context of craft cluster mapping in India, this manifests in the tendency to identify clusters by administrative boundary and road accessibility rather than by the relational networks of knowledge-sharing and material exchange that actually constitute a functional craft cluster.

This study adopts a qualitative research design, informed by an interpretive epistemology that prioritizes the subjective meanings and lived experiences of those engaged in or exiting from the sericulture and weaving sectors. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to this research because the processes under investigation, namely skill transmission, livelihood change and entrepreneurial aspiration, are embedded in social relationships, cultural norms and personal narratives that cannot be adequately captured by quantitative measures alone (Creswell, 2014).^{††}

Fieldwork was conducted across seven villages and two urban wards in Golaghat and Jorhat districts from October 2024 till March 2025. These two districts were selected purposively for their historical importance as hubs of Muga silk production and handloom weaving. Golaghat district, situated on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, is among the foremost Muga silk-producing regions in India, while Jorhat, historically known as the cultural capital of Assam, hosts a significant weaving community particularly concentrated in the Titabor and Mariani areas.

A total of 48 respondents participated across three categories: 18 active practitioners (weavers aged 40-70 and experienced sericulture farmers), 16 youth respondents aged 18-35 years with varying degrees of connection to the sectors, and 14 stakeholders including college teachers, Assam Sericulture Department officials, Self-Help Group representatives and NGO workers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45-90 minutes, six focus group discussions of 6-8 participants each, and participant observation at weaving households, rearing centres and a government training institute in Jorhat. All interviews were conducted in Assamese and Bodo, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, translated and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework.

Among the 18 active practitioners, all weavers were women, confirming the deeply gendered nature of handloom in Assam.^{‡‡} Their educational background ranged from primary to higher secondary level, and all had learned to weave from mothers or grandmothers. Formal training was the exception. Most treated weaving as a secondary livelihood alongside agriculture; only three reported it as their primary income source. Sericulture farmers in the practitioner category were predominantly male, aged 45-68 years, and several expressed frustration with the discontinuity of state extension support after the 1990s. Among the 16 youth respondents, most have undergraduate qualifications and were either unemployed or in casual labour. Only four were actively engaged in weaving or sericulture. Stakeholder respondents from the Assam Sericulture Department highlighted inadequate extension deployment and poor market linkage; college teachers noted an almost complete absence of weaving content in formal curricula; and Self-Help Group representatives reported high dropout rates from government weaving clusters owing to insufficient early income.

The Anatomy of Skill Deficit in the Cocoon-to-Loom Continuum

Respondents across age groups described a generational moment of discontinuity, a point at which the tacit knowledge encoded in the body and the hands of weavers and silk farmers ceased to travel from one generation to the next. As one 62-year-old weaver from Golaghat expressed: *"My father taught me to read the mulberry leaf, to feel the silkworm and to know when it was ready to spin. I tried to teach my son but he said this is old work, poor people's work. He went to Guwahati and works in a shop now."*

This testimony encapsulates a pattern confirmed by the Assam Sericulture Department's District-Level Data (2022-23), which recorded that Golaghat district saw a 31 per cent decline in the number of Muga cocoon rearers over the decade from 2012 to 2022.

Skill deficit operates at multiple levels simultaneously. At the technical level, competencies such as sericultural pest management, quality cocoon selection, natural dyeing and intricate motif creation

^{††}All fieldwork protocols were conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Assam Kaziranga University. Respondent identities have been anonymised throughout; quotations are attributed only by age, gender and occupational category. In cases where specific village identification could compromise respondent anonymity, the broader district-level location is used rather than the village name.

^{‡‡}The association of loom-craft with femininity in Assam is deeply embedded in the cultural and ritual life of Assamese communities. The ability to weave is historically regarded as a mark of a woman's readiness for marriage and adult social participation. The Bihu festival, the most important cultural festival of Assam, traditionally involves the gifting of hand-woven Gamusa, a ceremonial towel-cloth, creating a ritual economy of weaving that extends well beyond the commercial. The decline of weaving thus carries implications for cultural reproduction that cannot be reduced to its economic dimensions.

are being lost. At the cultural level, social prestige once attached to weaving and sericulture has eroded significantly among younger cohorts. At the economic level, declining returns make weaving a rationally unattractive option. The Fourth All India Handloom Census (2019-20) found the average monthly income of a handloom weaver in Assam to be approximately Rupees 4,200, which is significantly below the state minimum wage for unskilled labour.^{§§}

A focus group discussion with youth respondents in the Titabor area of Jorhat revealed a complex ambivalence. While participants were aware that weaving was part of their family heritage and expressed pride in Assamese textile identity, none considered pursuing it as a livelihood. One young man aged 24, a graduate in commerce, articulated this contradiction vividly: *“I am proud that my mother weaves Mekhela Chador. But I cannot eat pride. I need a job with salary, provident fund and dignity.”*

This comment invites a reading from Bourdieu: the field of weaving no longer offers the symbolic capital that might compensate for its low economic capital, and young people are making entirely rational decisions in pursuing formal employment even when it remains elusive.

Policy Fatigue and the Politics of Scheme Saturation

A finding of particular analytical significance concerns the relationship between governmental intervention and community disengagement. Rather than reversing the sector’s decline, decades of scheme-based support have generated what Bhowmick (2025) theorizes as policy fatigue, a condition in which communities subjected to repeated, inadequately resourced and poorly coordinated policy interventions develop a habituated skepticism that itself becomes a barrier to genuine participation. Multiple respondents across the practitioner and youth categories described a cyclical pattern: scheme announcement, training enrolment, initial enthusiasm, inadequate follow-through, market failure and eventual abandonment. A sericulture farmer with over two decades of experience in Golaghat articulated this with particular clarity: *“Every five years, the government comes with a new programme. They give us training for ten days, maybe a kit, take photographs and go. Nothing changes. I have been trained four times now for the same thing. The fourth time, I did not believe it would be different. And it was not.”*

This testimony resonates directly with Bhowmick’s (2025) elaboration of the politics of fatigue, which she describes as the structural asymmetry in which the state retains the institutional energy to repeatedly re-launch interventions while beneficiary communities exhaust their social and psychological capital in cycles of compliance and disappointment. The politics of fatigue is not simply a failure of implementation; it is a governance relationship in which the performance of concern substitutes for the substance of structural change.

Particularly revealing in this regard is the pattern of GIS-enabled mapping exercises conducted by state agencies to identify handloom and sericulture clusters for targeted intervention. As Bhowmick (2025) cautions, such cartographic exercises, however technically sophisticated, risk reproducing hierarchies of power under a sustainability banner: the act of mapping and categorizing weaving communities positions the state as the authoritative knower of geographic and economic reality while rendering invisible the relational knowledge, historical claims and community-defined boundaries that shape how practitioners themselves understand their spatial presence. In the study area, respondents from two villages reported that government GIS surveys had mapped their clusters but that subsequent interventions had been directed not to the households identified in the survey but to larger, more accessible settlements. This is a spatial politics of convenience that Bhowmick's framework helps to name and critique.

Green Tokenism and Aesthetic Disruption in Handloom Policy

A closely related finding concerns the increasing deployment of sustainability and environmental heritage discourses in the promotion of handloom and sericulture products, a phenomenon that this study identifies as a form of green tokenism in Bhowmick’s (2025) sense of the term. Muga silk, in particular, has been extensively marketed by state and national agencies as an eco-friendly, biodiversity-positive luxury fibre, with campaigns emphasizing its natural production process, its

^{§§}For context, the Assam government's minimum wage for unskilled daily workers was set at approximately Rupees 7,700 per month under the 2022 revision of the Minimum Wages Act schedule. The average handloom weaver's income of approximately Rupees 4,200 thus represents barely 55 per cent of the statutory minimum wage for unskilled labour, a figure that renders the rational calculation of young people against pursuing weaving as a primary livelihood entirely comprehensible within a capability-deprivation framework.

association with the forest ecosystems of Assam and its potential contribution to sustainable fashion globally.^{***}

While such branding has succeeded in raising the profile and market price of Muga silk in niche consumer segments, field evidence suggests that this aesthetic disruption, understood in Bhowmick's (2025) formulation as the reframing of a product's surface image without altering the structural conditions of its production, has yielded minimal benefit to primary producers. The premium commanded by Muga silk in urban retail and online markets has not translated into proportional income increases for rearers and weavers at the grassroots. A sericulture farmer in Golaghat described selling cocoons to middlemen at rates that had not kept pace with inflation over the preceding decade, while simultaneously observing Muga stoles and sarees branded as rare, sustainable Assamese silk being sold at prices ten to fifteen times the value he received for the raw material.

This divergence between the discursive valorization of the weaving and the material reality of its producers is precisely what Bhowmick (2025) theorizes as the gap that green tokenism creates: it offers symbolic recognition without structural redistribution, and in doing so, it may even serve to legitimate the existing order by creating the appearance of a thriving, globally valued sector while the actual producers of that value remain impoverished. Several youth respondents noted that the very branding campaigns designed to attract new entrants to the sector had had the paradoxical effect of raising their aspirations while simultaneously revealing the gulf between the sector's celebrated image and its ground-level economic realities.

Everyday Resistance among Weaving and Sericulture Communities

Against this backdrop of policy fatigue and green tokenism, the fieldwork documented significant evidence of what Bhowmick (2025) terms everyday resistance, which refers to the quiet, persistent and often unacknowledged practices through which marginalised communities navigate, negotiate and partially subvert the impositions of development governance. This resistance does not take the form of organised opposition or formal advocacy; it operates through the texture of daily practice and social interaction.

Several weavers, for instance, described maintaining dual registers of weaving knowledge: a set of standard techniques they disclosed and practiced during government training programmes and a set of more intricate, family-specific design traditions they consciously protected from institutional observation and standardisation. This selective disclosure is a form of epistemic self-preservation, an everyday practice of resistance that protects the embodied and tacit dimensions of weaving knowledge from the homogenizing pressures of scheme-based skill development. One weaver from Titabor, who had participated in three government training programmes over the course of a decade, observed quietly: *"What they teach in the training is the simple pattern. I learn it and I attend. But my grandmother's motifs I keep here' (she gestured to her chest) 'they are not for the training. Those belong to us."*

Young respondents demonstrated their own forms of everyday resistance, notably in the ways they leveraged scheme benefits such as access to looms, subsidised yarn and GI certification as inputs into self-directed enterprises that operated outside the formal reporting structures of the schemes themselves. Rather than rejecting state support entirely, these young people engaged with it instrumentally while pursuing entrepreneurial visions that diverged from the scheme's intended outcomes. This is consistent with Bhowmick's (2025) observation that everyday resistance is not simply refusal but a sophisticated navigation of institutional terrain that extracts usable resources while preserving agency.

Changing Livelihoods and the Social Restructuring of Weaving Communities

The fieldwork documented a clear transformation of livelihood strategies in both districts. Households previously dependent on weaving production have transitioned toward diversified

^{***} Muga silk received Geographical Indication (GI) certification from the Government of India in 2007, making Assam the only legally recognised site of authentic Muga silk production globally. The GI certification was expected to provide price protection and market exclusivity for Assamese producers. However, field evidence from the present study, corroborated by data from the Assam Sericulture Department, suggests that GI benefits have been captured disproportionately by traders and exporters in the value chain rather than by primary producers at the cocoon-rearing stage. This is a structural outcome that exemplifies the logic of green tokenism as theorised by Bhowmick (2025).

portfolios combining casual agricultural labour, petty trade, government scheme benefits and remittances from migrant family members. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) data for Assam indicate a notable shift in women's work away from home-based weaving toward casual daily wage labour outside the home, which has disrupted the domestic ecology in which handloom was transmitted through daily practice and observation. Several older women respondents described the loom as no longer the centre of household life but as: "*a piece of furniture gathering dust in the corner.*"

Government data also illuminate the structural dimensions of this livelihood change. The Economic Survey of Assam (2022-23) noted that despite the state's allocation of Rupees 320 crore to handloom and textile development under various schemes over the five-year period from 2018 to 2023, the sector's contribution to the state's Gross State Domestic Product remained stagnant at approximately 1.8 per cent. The report of the Department of Handloom, Textiles and Sericulture, Government of Assam (2023) explicitly noted the 'declining interest among younger generations in pursuing handloom weaving as a primary occupation' as a key challenge to the sector's sustainability.

The Role of Academic Institutions in Skill Revitalization

One of the most significant findings concerns the largely untapped role of academic institutions in revitalizing weaving knowledge. All fourteen stakeholder respondents independently identified the absence of formal academic engagement with sericulture and weaving as a critical gap. Neither the secondary school curriculum of the Board of Secondary Education, Assam, nor the undergraduate syllabi of most colleges in Golaghat and Jorhat incorporate substantive content on the science of sericulture, the cultural history of Assamese textiles or the economics of the handloom sector. This curricular silence, in Freire's (1970) terms, domesticates consciousness by teaching young people to regard their own heritage as irrelevant.

Teachers described informal bridge attempts including field visits to weaving clusters and guest lectures by master weavers, but these remained marginal for want of institutional recognition. One professor at a degree college in Jorhat observed: '*We know these matters. We take students to see the weavers. But it is not in the syllabus, not in the examination, so students do not take it seriously. It exists outside the frame of what counts as knowledge.*'

This observation resonates powerfully with Bourdieu's analysis of how institutions of education reproduce the symbolic violence that devalues non-academic forms of knowledge and skill and with Bhowmick's (2025) caution that institutional engagement with weaving community's risks becoming an exercise in aesthetic disruption, producing the appearance of integration without altering the curricular hierarchies that exclude weaving knowledge from legitimate academic discourse.

The study also documented several examples of innovative academic engagement that point toward what is possible. The Assam Agricultural University in Jorhat runs a degree programme in Sericulture that has produced graduates who have established successful silk production enterprises. The Central Silk Board, under the Ministry of Textiles, operates a training centre in Guwahati that offers short-term courses for youth, and its annual report (2022-23) noted a 28 per cent increase in enrolment over the previous year, suggesting genuine interest when opportunities are made accessible.

Youth Entrepreneurship: Constraints and Possibilities

Despite the structural challenges documented above, the fieldwork generated significant evidence of entrepreneurial aspiration among youth connected to the handloom and sericulture sectors. Several young respondents who had accessed government training or support through schemes such as the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme or the Mukhyamantri Yuva Udyami Yojana described attempts to establish small-scale weaving enterprises.

A young woman aged 27 years from a weaving family in Golaghat described how she had established a small online business selling hand-woven stoles and scarves after participating in a workshop organised by the District Industries Centre. She reported earning between Rupees 12,000 and Rupees 18,000 per month through direct consumer sales, considerably more than she could have earned as a weaver supplying to a cooperative: "*The product is the same Assamese weave, but the market is different. I sell to people in Bangalore and Mumbai who want something authentic. The problem is that I cannot produce enough because I am the only weaver and I cannot teach anyone quickly.*"

Her account illustrates both the entrepreneurial potential and the labour bottleneck created by the skill deficit: without a pool of trained weavers, individual enterprises cannot scale. The India Brand

Equity Foundation report on the handloom sector (2023) noted that the domestic market for handloom products in India is estimated at over Rupees 31,000 crore annually and is growing at a compound annual growth rate of approximately 8.5 per cent. The global market for natural silk, including Muga silk, is projected to reach USD 21.5 billion by 2027 (Grand View Research, 2022). Focus group discussions reveal that youth respondents who expressed entrepreneurial interest consistently identified four key enablers: structured skill training embedded within formal education, mentorship from successful weaving entrepreneurs, access to affordable credit and market infrastructure including e-commerce facilitation. Notably, and consistent with Sen's (1999) capability framework, the demand for dignified recognition of weaving as a legitimate knowledge domain was as prominent in their responses as the demand for financial support.

Critical Analysis and Policy Implications

The findings of this study converge on a central diagnosis: the crisis in the cocoon-to-loom continuum in Assam is fundamentally a crisis of social reproduction compounded by a crisis of governance credibility. The mechanisms through which sericulture and weaving skills have historically been reproduced, namely family apprenticeship, community practice and cultural valorization, have been systematically disrupted by modernisation without being replaced by adequate institutional alternatives. Government schemes have addressed the material dimension of this crisis through financial transfers, equipment subsidies and market exhibitions but have largely failed to address its cultural and pedagogical dimensions.

Analysed through the theoretical lens of Bhowmick (2025), the policy architecture governing the handloom and sericulture sectors in Assam exhibits the classic features of what she terms the politics of fatigue: a governance regime characterised by the iterative recycling of scheme-based interventions that generate institutional activity through workshops, surveys, exhibitions and GI registrations without disturbing the structural conditions that produce disadvantage. The sustainability framing applied to Muga silk and handloom products by state and national agencies constitutes a particularly clear instance of what Bhowmick (2025) identifies as green tokenism: the deployment of environmental and heritage discourse to generate symbolic capital and market differentiation without ensuring that the benefits of this rebranding flow to the communities whose labour produces the valorized product.

This finding echoes Sinha (2020), whose study of handloom clusters in northeast India found that government interventions were predominantly supply-side, neglecting the demand-side challenge of creating a new generation of skilled practitioners. Baruah (2021) similarly documented the aspirational migration of youth away from weaving occupations driven by the symbolic devaluation of manual skill within educational institutions and mass media. The present study affirms both findings while adding the dimension of institutional fatigue as a further obstacle to sector renewal. Bhattacharya and Das (2019) have argued that the transition from artisan to entrepreneur requires not only capital and market access but a fundamental cognitive shift in how practitioners conceptualize their weaving. This is a shift that formal education, properly designed, is uniquely positioned to facilitate. The challenge, as Bhowmick (2025) cautions, is ensuring that such facilitation does not itself become aesthetic disruption: a performative curricular gesture that produces the appearance of engagement without genuine capability expansion.

From a policy standpoint, this study recommends several interconnected interventions. At the curricular level, the State government should work with the Assam Higher Education Council to integrate modules on traditional knowledge of weaving into undergraduate programmes in sociology, economics and rural development, designed not as heritage tourism but as rigorous engagement with the political economy of the sector. At the institutional level, dedicated Weaving Entrepreneurship Incubation Centres should be established at colleges in Golaghat and Jorhat, with embedded mentorship structures that draw on the knowledge of master practitioners and successful entrepreneurs.

At the market infrastructure level, the Assam Handloom Corporation should be restructured to function as a market facilitation agency rather than a procurement monopoly, enabling direct producer-to-consumer connections through digital platforms. Critically, any expansion of GIS-enabled cluster mapping should be accompanied by community participation protocols that ensure mapping exercises serve community-defined goals rather than administrative convenience, as a direct

response to the concern raised by Bhowmick (2025) regarding the reproduction of power hierarchies under sustainability frameworks.

Finally, reversing the condition of policy fatigue requires not simply better-designed schemes but a fundamental reorientation of the state's relationship to weaving communities: from a governance posture of periodic intervention toward one of sustained structural partnership, co-designed with communities and accountable to the forms of everyday resistance and counter-knowledge that communities themselves have generated as survival strategies.

Conclusion

The cocoon-to-loom continuum in Assam is at a critical historical juncture. The skill, culture and livelihood system it sustains is neither irreversibly lost nor automatically recoverable. This qualitative study, grounded in fieldwork across Golaghat and Jorhat and anchored in Bourdieu, Sen and Bhowmick (2025), has demonstrated that the skill deficit in sericulture and weaving communities is not a technical problem amenable to training workshops alone but a deeply social phenomenon rooted in the devaluation of traditional knowledge within modern institutions, compounded by governance regimes that have themselves become sources of fatigue, tokenism and disengagement. When educational institutions take traditional weaving knowledge seriously, as the Assam Agricultural University's sericulture programme and the Central Silk Board's training initiatives demonstrate, young people respond with genuine entrepreneurial energy. The challenge is to move this from the margins to the mainstream of educational and policy imagination, without reproducing the aesthetic disruption and green tokenism that Bhowmick (2025) identifies as the characteristic failures of sustainability-branded interventions.

The everyday resistance documented in this study, including weavers protecting their most intricate design knowledge from institutional standardisation and youth leveraging scheme resources toward self-defined entrepreneurial ends, points to a reservoir of agency and cultural commitment that policy should seek to amplify rather than absorb. The silk thread that connects Assam's mulberry groves to its looms has not yet snapped. But it is fragile. What is required is not nostalgia for a romanticized past but a rigorous, evidence-based and socially committed effort to re-imagine the cocoon-to-loom continuum as a living, viable and dignified pathway to livelihood and entrepreneurship for the youth of Assam. This reimagining must be collective and accountable, involving educators, policymakers, entrepreneurs and communities in a shared project of cultural and economic renewal in which the terms of partnership are negotiated rather than imposed.

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Brief bio of first author

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