

Involvement of Women of Assam in Handloom Weaving Industry: Exploring a Linkage with Their Socio-Economic Conditions



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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to delineate involvement of women in weaving industry in Assam, India and its inter-relationship with socio-economic conditions of the women. The weaving industry constitutes a timeless facet of the rich cultural heritage of Assam. Highest proportion of weavers in India can be seen in Assam and around 99 per cent of them are women. Weaving in Assam is the monopoly of Women folk irrespective of any caste or community. However opposite situation can be noticed with respect to the average number of days of work per adult handloom weaver per year in Assam as it is far below than the other states of India. It can be well acknowledged that socio-economic characteristics must conceivably influence in their involvement. Based on a primary survey of 166 women involved in weaving, a correlation matrix has been constructed to examine the issue. The analysis clearly shows that socio-economic factors such as income and education positively correlate with involvement of women in weaving.*

Key-Words: *Income, Involvement, Handloom, Weavers, Women*

I. INTRODUCTION

The handloom industry embodies the rich traditional, historical and cultural diversity that distinguishes India from the rest of the world (Rao & Kumar, 2018). It occupies a pivotal place within the socio-economic fabric of society. One of the advantages of the handloom industry is that it is more labour intensive requiring less capital. This sector is as old as the human civilization itself and is being sustained by the transferring of skill from one generation to the next. The handloom weaving sector provides employment, either direct or indirect; to more than 43 lakh weavers and allied workers in the country which contains a large number of people from the scheduled caste/tribe, backward and minority community (Advantage Assam, 2017). Interestingly, women comprise a majority of adult handloom workers (aged 18 years and above) at 77.94 per cent compared to only 22 per cent of adult men workers.

A disaggregation of the total handloom workers by gender and type of activity across states in India shows that out of the total handloom workers, about 75.74 per cent women in the country are handloom weavers against 24 per cent of male handloom weavers. Of the total handloom weavers, the highest proportion is found in the state Assam at 48 per cent followed by 11.98 per cent in the state West Bengal, while the lowest and almost insignificant proportion of weavers at 0.02 per cent is in the state of Sikkim (NCAER, 2010). One striking feature of handloom weaving in the state Assam is that it is confined mostly to women with most of them being domestic weavers. The relative share of women weavers to the total weavers in Assam is 99 per cent whereas that of male weavers is less than one per cent to the total weavers in the entire state (NCAER, 2010). In earlier times, the skill to weave was the primary qualification of a young girl for her eligibility for marriage. Almost all Assamese women used to know how to weave then and every care was taken to teach them weaving. The weaving tradition has been handed down from generation to generation by the Assamese women folk who excelled in production of extremely beautiful designs in their looms. Skill in the art of weaving and spinning has always been held to be one of the highest attainments of an Assamese woman. This perhaps could be one explanation as to why Assam has the largest concentration of handloom weavers in India (Handloom of Assam, n.d.). Contrary to use of modern technology and tool in the textile sector in present days, the handloom sector continues to play a very crucial role in terms of employment generation and socio-economic development of Assam (Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2012). However, in spite of having highest proportion of weavers in the state Assam amongst all the states in India, it is surprising that the average number of days of work per adult handloom weaver¹ in the whole North-Eastern region of India (including Assam) is far below than the other states in India. Even it is way lower than the all India average i.e. 183 days per weaver. While handloom weavers in the North-Eastern region work on an average 142 days, other states in India work for 255 days in a year (NCAER, 2010). According to the Third handloom census, 2009-2010, the explanation of the lower number in the North-East is primarily because there is a greater proportion of domestic workers, who mostly work part-time,

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¹ Average number of days of work per adult handloom weaver is the total days of work quoted by all adult handloom weavers in a household divided by total adult handloom weavers in the household (NCAER, 2010).

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and the impact of their lower average days of work pulls the national average on this indicator to a lower figure.

II. OBJECTIVE

Keeping in view the lower average number of days of work per weaver per year in North-Eastern region as a whole and Assam in particular, it can be asserted that underneath the larger proportion of domestic workers and part-time workers in North-East India including Assam, there must be the possibility of the influence of certain socio-economic variables. Again, we know that the dominance of women weavers in the total weavers' workforce is highest in the North-Eastern states i.e. 99 per cent. However, there is no such study which relates the involvement of women weavers with the socio-economic conditions. It is in this broad context that the present paper seeks to examine the relationship between socio-economic-demographic variables such as age, marital status, education, and their income from weaving and involvement of women in handloom weaving in Assam. The paper, therefore, highlights demographic as well as socio-economic characteristics of weavers in the beginning.

III. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the aforesaid objective, the study mainly depends on the primary sources of data. Nevertheless, secondary data has been used to supplement the primary data. For undertaking the study, Barpeta District of the state Assam from India has been selected. Barpeta stands second in terms of number of handloom weavers in the state next only to Kamrup District (Directorate of Handloom & Textiles, Assam, 2014-2015). The presence of a large number of women weavers with 99.70 percent of the total weavers, which is slightly higher than the state Assam as a whole (99.09 per cent) has made Barpeta district a significant one for undertaking the present study. A primary survey covering a total of 166 households² representing one woman involved in weaving from each household has been undertaken. A multi-stage sampling technique has been applied for selection of the sampled women weavers. At the first stage, two (2) blocks which have the highest concentration of handloom weavers among all the twelve blocks in Barpeta district have been purposively selected. At the second stage, one (1) village from each block has been chosen based on the criterion of having the highest concentration of women handloom weavers. The primary data have been collected through a structured questionnaire and personal interview method from two villages namely

²A household is defined as a person or a group of persons who live under the same roof and share the same kitchen and have been living together for more than six months. If a person is out for more than six months on the date of canvassing, he/she is not treated as a member of the household. Those entering the household on account of marriage or other alliances and new-born babies have been counted as members of the household, even if they have lived with the household for less than six months. People who live in the same dwelling but do not share food expenses or eat meals together have not been considered members of the same household. Likewise, people who eat together but do not sleep in the same dwelling have not been considered members of the same household (NCAER, 2010).

Barbang and Bhella during March, 2019 to June, 2019. At the third stage, 10 per cent of the total weavers' households in each village have been selected for the study with the simple random sampling method without replacement, hence forming a sample of 166 women weavers.

The variables selected includes: Present age of the woman involved in weaving, education level, marital status, income from weaving and involvement in terms of hours of work. In order to analyse the interrelationship between age, marital status, education, income from weaving and involvement of women weavers in the handloom industry a correlation matrix has been used. In this regard, hours of work spent on weaving is used as a proxy variable for measuring the involvement of women handloom weavers.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Socio-economic and Demographic Characteristics

The socio-demographic and economic profile of the sampled population is presented in Table I. Descriptive analysis of the sample shows that the percentage of women weavers in the age group of ≤ 29 years is the lowest from amongst all age groups at 7.23 per cent. On the other hand, the highest proportion of women weavers is found in the age group 40-44 years at 16.27 per cent. Further, it can be observed that 30.73 per cent of the total sampled women weavers are in the age group of 40-49 years and 26.50 per cent in the age group of 50-59 years.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Profile of respondents (N=166)

	N	%		N	%
1. Age Group			5. Marital Status		
≤ 29	12	7.23	Never married	14	8.43
30-34	20	12.05	Currently Married	135	81.33
35-39	22	13.25	Widowed	17	10.24
40-44	27	16.27	6. Hours of work Per day		
45-49	24	14.46	1 hour	1	0.60
50-54	23	13.85	2 hours	9	5.42
55-59	21	12.65	3 hours	13	7.83
60 and above	17	10.24	4 hours	41	24.70
2. Level of Education			5 hours	45	27.11
Illiterate	11	6.63	6 hours	29	17.47
Literate without formal schooling	8	4.82	7 hours	22	13.25
Below Primary	22	13.25	8 hours	6	3.61
Primary	30	18.07	7. Monthly Income from Handloom Activity		
Middle	62	37.35	≤ 1000	26	15.66
High School/Secondary	21	12.65	1001-1500	22	13.25
Higher Secondary	10	6.02	1501-2000	43	25.90
Graduate & above	2	1.20	2001-2500	32	19.28



3. Social Group			2501-3000	25	15.06
General	134	80.72	>3001	18	10.84
OBC	12	7.23		N	%
SC	20	12.05	8. Type of Dwelling		
4. Religion		0.00	Kuccha	39	23.49
Hindu	166	100	Semi-Pucca	92	55.42
			Pucca	35	21.08

N= Frequency, Source: Field Survey

Another startling find is a significant proportion of women in higher age group of 60 years and above, undertaking weaving as an occupation. A total of 10.24 per cent of the sampled weavers aged 60 years or above are still continuing in the occupation for making a living without any retirement. A plausible explanation for the lower proportion of women weavers in the lower age groups can be the migration of people from weaving to other activities; comparatively younger generations are not interested in weaving anymore because of low remuneration (Boruah & Kaur, 2015; Liton, Islam & Saha, 2016). Weaving is, on the other hand, still an important venture for the women weavers belonging to the age groups of 40 years and above. It can be observed that the highest percentage of women weavers is having an education only up to middle level which is about 37.4 per cent. The weavers who have college education constitute only 7.22 per cent of the total sampled women weavers.

Comparing the women weavers in Barpeta district by their marital status, we observe that women weavers who are currently married dominate the weaving profession at 81.33 per cent followed by widowed at 10.24 per cent, respectively. The lowest percentage i.e. 8.43 per cent is observed for the women weavers who fall under the category of never married. Again, pertaining to the social group, it is found that 80.72 per cent of the weavers belong to General category, followed by weavers of SC (12.05 per cent) and OBC (7.23 per cent) category, respectively.

Further, all the sampled women weavers reported to be Hindu which is an interesting finding. It is found that majority of the women weavers (82.53 per cent) work for 4 to 7 hours per day. Most of the weavers start weaving in the morning from 8 or 9 A.M. They revealed that they mostly weave during their free time. Here, it may be noted that 61.45 per cent are full time weavers working for more than four hours in a day while 38.55 per cent are part-time weavers working for less than four hours a day. The table clearly shows that there are about 58.43 per cent of the weavers who earn income between ₹1001 to ₹2500 rupees per month from the weaving. Only 10.84 per cent of the respondent weavers earn more than ₹3001 rupees per month from weaving activity. It is also perturbing to note that 15.67 per cent of the weavers earn ₹1000 or even less than ₹1000 rupees per month. The type of dwelling of the women weavers exemplified their poor residential status. 23.49 per cent of the respondents are living in *kuccha* houses while 55.42 per cent are living in *Semi-Pucca* houses. Only 21.08 per cent of the households have *pucca* houses.

B. Correlation Matrix

Given the socio-economic and demographic profile of the women involved in weaving in the study area, we will now analyse if there is any correlation between the socio-

economic status and their reported involvement in the handloom weaving industry. For this purpose, a correlation matrix has been constructed using certain selected variables including age, marital status, education as well as income from weaving and mapping them with involvement of the women weavers via a proxy variable which is the hours of work. The result of the analysis has been presented in Table II. The findings of the socio-economic conditions and involvement (that is measured taking hours of work as a proxy variable), using the correlation matrix is summarised as follows:

- i) Income is positively correlated with hours of work which means that income from weaving is positively correlated with involvement of the women weavers. The relation is found to be statistically significant.
- ii) Educational level is also observed to be having a positive correlation with the hours of work or involvement of the women weavers.
- iii) Age is negatively correlated with the hours of work of the women weavers and it is found to be statistically significant.
- iv) Marital status of the women weavers is also a significant variable when it comes to involvement of the women in the handloom industry, and marital status is negatively correlated with the hours of work or involvement of the women in the handloom industry.

Table II: Correlation Matrix of Selected Variables (N=166)

Variables		Age	Marital Status	Education Level	Income from Weaving	Hours of Work
Age	Pearson Correlation	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
Marital Status	Pearson Correlation	.629**	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000				
Education Level	Pearson Correlation	-.576**	-.385**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000			
Income from Weaving	Pearson Correlation	-.426**	-.450**	.342**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		
Hours of Work	Pearson Correlation	-.275**	-.196*	.156*	.497**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.011	.044	.000	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

C. Implication of the Findings

As seen from the above discussion, income is playing an important role in deciding the involvement of women in the handloom industry in Barpeta district. In the survey, it becomes evident that the women weavers are not under any employer and they work in their own houses and earn wages from the sale.



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The increase in their income or earning solely depends on the market demand for products. Thus, the more is the income or earning from the sale as a result of increase in market demand, the more is the involvement of women in weaving activity. According to some respondents, before they used to work under the co-operative society but due to very low wage given by the co-operative society, they have turned to be independent weavers as it gives comparatively more earning. This could help explain as to why the involvement of women weavers is positively influenced by the income earned by the women weavers.

Another factor shown to be having positive association is educational level, however data in this sense does not seem to be having a strong correlation between educational level and hours of work. This is because in the weaving industry no doubt, educational level is an important feature that depicts the individual's ability to learn; yet skill in weaving matters somewhat more than educational level in the involvement of women in the industry. Bortamuly and Goswami (2012) also stated that it is the efficiency of the worker that matters in the handloom industry in Assam rather than his or her educational qualification.

Again, the involvement of women weavers is negatively influenced by the age factor. Even if the women can have more wages, then also if they become older, their involvement gets reduced in the handloom industry. Weaving needs strength and it is observed that physical strength and health reduces as one person grows older. This negatively influences the involvement of them in the handloom industry.

Marital status also is an important factor as found from our analysis but it is negatively influencing the hours of work of the women weavers. The correlation is however found to be not strong. This may be mainly because 81.33 per cent of the sampled women weavers are married and possibly, being married also brings in the income earned from the husband to the household; as a result, the pressure of earning lowers in case of women weavers after marriage. Thus, the hours of work of the married women gets reduced which shows a negative correlation between the two.

V. CONCLUSION

From the discussions above, it is evident that involvement of women in the handloom industry is positively influenced by income they receive from weaving activity. The low income from weaving appears to be a deterrent not just to the weavers but also to the younger generation from undertaking weaving in future. Increase in their wages and income in this sector would help in bringing more women to the industry. Increased income can be generated from weaving by creating a market demand through advertising or publicity and providing minimum support price for raw materials. Another find is that the educational level is also observed to have a positive effect on the hours of work of the women weavers although the relation is not strong. Therefore, literacy levels of weavers must be improved through adult education programmes and special education programmes and they should be made aware of the schemes targeted for the weaving community.

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