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The Practice of Weaving Among Assamese Women in Colonial Times

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Abstract

Handloom weaving has a great importance in the socio-economic life of Assam since early times. The custom of spinning and weaving is universal among Assamese women. In the art of rearing silk worms and weaving of the silk clothes, Assamese women had earned reputation from ancient times. Women from almost every community in Assam indulged in spinning and weaving. With the establishment of the British rule, Assamese people, who were once self-dependents in the matter of cloth, began to use cheap, mill made imported garments and rejected their tradition of spinning and weaving. But during the time of the Indian Independence Movement the tradition of home spinning and weaving in Assam regained popularity. As one of the oldest crafts of Assam, weaving is famous for its unique charm and simplicity. Techniques of handloom weaving are handed down from one generation to another. From a very young age Assamese girls acquired knowledge of weaving clothes.

Key Words : Colonial Assam, Weaving, Spinning, Weaving Loom, Silk, *Khadi*

Introduction

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

Weaving is a way of life in Assam. It is one of the brightest parts of Assamese culture and heritage. Assamese woman can weave excellent floral and geometrical designs in clothes. Almost every Assamese household had one or more looms for weaving clothes of various designs and categories. By rearing silk worms and producing silk thread from the cocoons of these worms Assamese women wove clothes. They also produced thread also from cotton. Skill in the art of spinning and weaving was considered the highest attainment of an

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Assamese woman and when a marriage proposal was made the first question asked regarding the eligibility of a girl was whether she knew the *bowa-kota* i.e. spinning and weaving.¹

The main objective of my research paper is to study the weaving culture among the women of Colonial Assam and its socio-economic importance in historical perspective. This paper will also study the weaving, dyeing, silk rearing technology used by Assamese women in colonial times and will also analyse the impact of British colonial rule upon Assamese weaving culture.

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

Weaving in Assam through the Ages

The art of sericulture and the rearing of different silk worms for manufacturing different kinds of silk clothes were known to the people of Assam from time immemorial. Ramayana mentions “the country of the cocoon rearers.”² This country of cocoon rearers is believed to be kamarupa. The Arthasastra of Kautilya mentioned a place named Suvarna kundyia which produced various silk garments such as *ksauma*, *dukula* and *patrorna*. Historians are of the opinion that Suvarna Kundyia is the Sonkudiha of modern Kamarupa.³ *Kshauma*, *dukula* and *patrorna* cloths may be taken to mean the *eri*, *muga*, *pat* silk of Assam. Francies Hamilton noted in the early nineteenth century that, “The native women of all castes, from the queen downwards, weave the four kinds of silk that are produced in the country, and with which three-fourths of the Assamese people are clothed. There may be one loom for every two women; and in great families there are eight or ten, which are wrought by slave girls. The raw materials are seldom purchased; each family spins and weaves the silks which it rears, and petty dealers go round and purchase for ready money.”

The credit of making weaving a universal practice among all class and caste of people in Assam goes to Momai Tamuli Barbarua, the minister of Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-1641). He passed an order that everyday all capable women had to spin two cospes of yarn before they went to sleep. Besides it, every household had to contribute to the royal stores annually one seer of home spun silk. These orders had far reaching effect of ensuring the self sufficiency of Assamese people in the matter of cloth. The Ahom kings had a large number of looms within the royal campus for production and supply of various kinds of clothes. For supplying yarn and other raw materials for the looms of the royal palace, under the Raidangia queen the Raidangia Phukan and Raidangia Barua and under Parbotia Queen Parbatia Phukan and Parbotia Barua were appointed. Some of the Ahom queens were in charge of looking after the activities of royal looms. Ahom King Siva Singha’s (1714-1744) queen Sarbeswari opened a school of weaving within the royal palace to teach the girls of

the neighbouring areas the art of weaving. She admitted there girls from every community and caste. She imported specimen of floral designs and brocades for the borders of the clothes from different parts of India to improvise Assamese weaving industry.

Assamese military generals or commanders of the time of monarchy had a special custom of wearing an evil-averting cloth known as *kavach kapor*. The yarns for spinning this cloth must be made and spun the cloth within a single night.⁴ It is believed that if a woman can give such cloth to her husband, he can escape death in the battle field.

The tribes of Assam had their own traditions of clothing. Women from all the tribes of Assam weave clothes with various colourful and attractive designs and they conciliated each other by presents of their hand spanned cloths.

Impact of British Colonial Rule upon Assamese Weaving Tradition

Establishment of the British colonial rule brought revolutionary changes to Assamese clothing trends and textile industry. Till the pre-British times, the clothing requirement of the Assamese society was fulfilled by the hand loom productions of Assamese women and there was little trade in clothes. During the colonial period imported mill made cloth became easily obtainable in Assam at a cheap rate. So Assamese women began to neglect the hard working practice of spinning and weaving and started wearing imported clothes. As these products were much finer and smoother than the Assamese handloom clothes, they easily attracted the people. Though the interior parts of Assam, the tradition of weaving continued, spinning and dyeing became extinct due to the competition from British and Indian machine spun yarn. Even in rural areas women began to weave clothes from mill made yarns.

But all people were not economically sound to buy clothes from the markets. On the other hand there were some socio-religious prohibitions in using western clothes in the Assamese society. Some of the Assamese people did not use imported clothes as they considered it anti-nationalist. So these people wore clothes by weaving clothes from hand spun threads. The best of Manchester products could not hold down the native *pat*, *muga* and *eri* weaving industry, as there were no substitutes for these products.⁵

Weaving Technology Used in Assam

In the Assamese *Bihunam*, *Bianam* or wedding songs, ballads etc. ample evidence can be found about the works of spinning and weaving with the help of *jatar* and *takuri*, winding threads on to the reels, weaving in looms, rearing silks etc. Assamese handloom industry was a cottage industry in which spinning, weaving and other processes were done by the same person. Weaving technology remained almost same during the colonial period in Assam like the medieval times.

Weaving looms, that were used by Assamese weavers during the colonial period can be classified under two groups- handlooms and power looms. Two types of handlooms were used in Assam; *Mati sâl* or throw shuttle loom and *kokâlôt bondha sâl* or loin loom. *Mati sâl* or throw shuttle loom was used in the plain areas of Assam. In this kind of loom

shuttle is thrown across the thread by hand. The production of this kind of loom is low but it can weave many specialized fabrics. This loom is fitted to four posts fixed on the ground. *Kokalot bandha sâl* or loin loom is a kind of primitive loom used by the people of the hilly areas of Assam. They are also called 'Back Strap' loom because this type of loom is attached to the body of the weaver with a back strap. These looms have no any permanent fixture or heavy frames. Fly shuttle loom was invented by John Key in 1733 in Britain which revolutionised the weaving technology and make it less laborious than before. But this loom was not popular in Assam during the colonial times. Assamese weavers were not interested in these looms and preferred traditional looms as they did not liked to leave their age old practice.

Dyeing

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

Silk Rearing

Assamese handloom industry was basically silk oriented. Three kinds of silk worms are commonly reared in Assam - the mulberry silk worm (*Bombyx moriL.*), the *muga* (*Antheraea assamensis*) and the *eri* (*Attacusricini*). The mulberry silk worms are fed on the leaves of mulberry plants. In Assamese they were called *Pat palu*. This type of worm is of two kinds, one is *Bar pat* and the other is *Saru pat*, i.e. big and small respectively. *Saru pat* worms can be reared from two to six generations a year. But generally two generations are reared in the Assamese months of *Kati* and *Jeth*, respectively known as *Katia* and *Jethua*. *Bar pat* worms are reared in the month of *Chot* and known as *Chotua*. The *Muga* silk are produced from *muga* silk worms. *Muga* is not only charming and beautiful, but also durable and strong. These worms are generally fed on the leaves of the *Som* trees (*Machilus bombycina*). Sometimes the worms are fed on the leaves of *Dighlati*, *Patisonda*, *Domlati* and *Soalu* trees. Best qualities of *muga* silk *Chapa-patia* and *Mejankuri* are produced from the worms which are fed on the leaves of the *Champa* and *Adakari* trees respectively. *Muga* worms are reared five times in a year. The *Eri* is a warm natural yarn found in Assam. These worms are fed on the leaves of *Eri* but it also feed on the leaves of *Kecheru* tree. In a year up to seven generation of *eri* worms can be reared. Of all the four varieties of fabrics of Assam, *eri* was the cheapest and the most common for daily use during winter seasons. Another kind of silk, called *tusser* (*Antheraea paphia*) was also produced in Assam. This variety of silk was produced from the worms which feed on the leaves of *Kutkuri*, *Phutuka*

and *Bogori* tree. Though the people of Assam reared these worms during the days of the Ahom monarchy, later they abandoned this practice.

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

Ornamentation in fabric

Traditionally Assamese women ornamented clothes through loom embroidery. Assamese people used *guna* in embroidery works. *Guna* is a kind of gold and silver thread and the colour of *guna* threads are white and golden. Different coloured threads were also used in embroidery work. In Assam textile motifs and designs are inspired by rich biodiversity of this region. Natural objects of aesthetic appeal such as flowers, birds, animals and geometric patterns and some religious motifs find expression in the fabrics.

Ideology of Khadi and its Impact upon Assamese Weaving Tradition

In the struggle for Indian independence, ideology of using *Khadi* or *khaddar* or hand woven cloth made from hand spun threads was an important part of Indian nationalism. The idea of *Khadi* gained popularity in Assam and it spread to every region of Assam. During that time the custom of spinning and weaving regained popularity all over again in every household of Assam. The idea of hand spinning and weaving was not a new concept for Assamese people. But the *Khadi* movement spread the idea of hand spinning and weaving not only as a household daily work, but also as a nationalist ideology. Earlier spinning and weaving were considered in Assamese society as only women's work, but in the national struggle for freedom both man and woman spun and weaved clothes. Weaving schools were established in different parts of Assam. These schools and weaving teachers taught Assamese people improved weaving techniques like 'flying shuttle looms' to enhance the production. Weaving was included in the nationalist schools as a part of school curriculum. C F Andrews wrote in an article named 'Khaddar in Assam' (Published in 'Young India', 11 June 1925) that Assamese ladies were clothed from head to foot in Khaddar. He said that if this custom of using clothes woven by own hands could spread to the other provinces of India, at least among Congress households it would be a glorious achievement.⁶

Economic Importance of Weaving in Colonial Assam

Weaving was not only a part of Assamese culture and heritage; it was also the largest indigenous economic activity of Assamese people after agriculture. Many Assamese families have been saved from economic collapse by their women folk's labor in weaving looms. Sometime clothes were exchanged for goods which were not individually and locally produced. Handloom weaving had provided almost whole of the clothing requirements of Assam till the pre-British times. Commercialisation of clothing started in Assam only after the coming of the British into Assam. The Colonial rule led to urbanization, commercialization,

western education system and migration etc in Assam and they in turn introduced new clothing practices and desires among the people of the Brahmaputra valley. With the growing popularity of smoother, finer and cheaper machine made clothes of Indian and Manchester mills, Assamese weavers began to produce only special varieties of clothes mainly for women and for some social and religious occasions. From the end of the 19th century the domestic use of Assamese silk became restricted because of the growth of demand for it outside Assam.⁷ Assamese silk, mainly *muga* had a very high demand in Europe and it formed the main item of trade of the East India Company during the 18th and early 19th centuries.⁸

Employment of handlooms in Assam was considered a spare time employment and so the output of handlooms in Assam was not comparably high. Though there were enough raw materials available for the development, endogenous weaving industry did not developed in Colonial Assam. Assamese people were not interested in doing sericulture works in organized and commercial way.

Conclusion

Assamese women considered weaving as one of their daily works. Earlier Assamese society was self- dependent in fulfilling its clothing requirements. But during the colonial period, spinning and weaving lost popularity. Though weaving is continued till today with some ups and downs, spinning and dyeing have become 'things of history'. Assamese weaving technology and weaving equipment have remained same as that of the colonial period and earlier. During the Indian independence movement, Assamese weaving culture regained strength. After his first visit to Assam, Mahatma Gandhi commented that Assamese women weave fairy tales in cloth and every Assamese woman is a born weaver.⁹ But traditional weaving 'culture' could not be successful in becoming a profitable 'profession' in colonial Assam and it remained only a spare time activity.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Gait, E, *A History of Assam*, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, 2008, p.271
- ² Rajguru, S, *Medieval Assamese Society*, Asami, Nagaon,1988, p.293
- ³ *Ibid*
- ⁴ Bhuyan, Suryya Kumar, *Studies in the History of Assam*, Guwahati, 1965, p 67
- ⁵ Saikia, R, *Social and Economic History of Assam*, New Delhi, 2000, p.68
- ⁶ Bhuyan, S. K. ,*op.cit*, p. 68
- ⁷ Saikia, R, *op.cit*, p.71
- ⁸ Gait, E, *op.cit*. p. 271
- ⁹ Kakati, Satis Chandra (ed), *Discovery of Assam*, Calcutta, 1964, p. 5