



A Study On Socio-Economic Condition Of Bodo Women Weavers In Sualkuchi Development Block In Kamrup (Rural), Assam

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Abstract

The silk industry of Assam is mainly centered in the Sualkuchi block of Kamrup (Rural) District. It is seen that over 98% of the female weavers in the Sualkuchi silk industry are migrants from neighboring areas, having left their hometown due to a lack of work opportunities. According to the 2019–20 handloom census, 92% of Assamese households made less than Rs 10,000 per month, particularly those that work in the state's silk sector.

This paper throws a light on the socio-economic condition of bodo women weavers in Sualkuchi Development Block, Kamrup (Rural), Assam. The main objectives of the study are, (a) to assess the socio-economic condition of Bodo women weavers, (b) to understand their problems, and (c) to offer suggestions for their socio-economic upliftment.

The study is based on the secondary data. The results display that the lack of education and poverty of the bodo community often forces the bodo women into the weaving profession. There are also other challenges such as low wages, poor working conditions, lack of awareness of social rights, etc.

Keywords: Bodo women weavers, Socio-economic condition, Women weavers, Silk industry

1. Introduction

The ancient weaving industry in Sualkuchi block in Kamrup Rural in Assam is well-known. In particular, it produces Assamese silk, or "Muga" and "Eri". There are different categories of weavers. Firstly, large-scale operators, known as master weavers, often use seven handlooms and employ weavers. Around 37% of all handloom businesses are large enterprises. The primary issues facing master weavers and large-scale business owners are the lack of silk yarn and the decline in demand for their handcrafted goods due to the production of more affordable clothing with traditional designs on powerlooms. Nevertheless, master weavers frequently have good relationships with outside traders, such as retailers and wholesalers. Secondly, there are tiny businesses that employ family members to run their weaving business. These businesses, known as own-account enterprises (OAEs), make up the remaining 63% of Sualkuchi's total number of businesses. The OAEs and the master weavers typically collaborate under a contract. The

hired migrant weavers are the third type of weavers, after the master weavers and the OAEs. These are typically employed by master weavers who run sizable businesses and need the extra labor of hired weavers. There are about 20,000 weavers in the Sualkuchi silk industry and among them 28% are bodo women (Kalita, 2019).

The Bodo women weavers of Sualkuchi are an important part of this colorful tapestry of traditional workmanship. Historically, they have played a crucial role in Sualkuchi's weaving culture, greatly influencing the local economy and way of life. Their proficiency in creating traditional Assamese textiles, such as the highly valued Muga and Eri silks, is a reflection of ingrained cultural values and skills that have been refined over many centuries. This role elevates their social status within their community, where weaving is both a respected occupation and a cultural preservation activity.

In addition, for Bodo women weaving is an essential source of income. For many, it is their main source of income, supporting families and fostering stability in the home. However, the majority of the industry functions within a conventional framework, which is frequently defined by small, family-run businesses. This arrangement exposes women weavers to financial risks and restricts scalability, even as it promotes cultural continuity and communal cohesiveness. Economic volatility, exorbitant expenses for raw materials, and rivalry from mass-produced textiles are major obstacles that affect their security of income and stability of finances.

Thus, by taking into account historical settings, economic variables, social structures, and current issues, this study seeks to provide light on the socio-economic circumstances of Bodo women weavers.

2. Review of literature

According to Kalita (2019), the districts of lower Assam (mainly Baga and Udalguri) are the primary source of the bodo women weavers in Sualkuchi. The labor is contract-based, seasonal, and strictly temporary. A weaver puts in at least ten hours a day at work. One weaver is thought to be able to make up to 100 rupees a day. The interesting fact is payments are done on a weekly basis. Since most of the women take out loans in advance, they are forced to work as bonded laborers to pay their owners back. There are no further benefits or incentives given to the weavers. In colonies, almost all of them reside in rented homes. Kerosene fuel is found to be used in 100% of the respondents. There is no labor union or forum that these women weavers may use to voice their concerns about exploitation. The loom owners' profit margin is shrinking since the cost of silk yarn has gone up. Thus, it is not thought that loom owners have a better situation, which has a negative impact on bodo migrant weavers as well.

Moreover, a majority of bodo women weavers stated that their family's poverty forced them to enter this sector as weavers. Additionally, they have extremely low levels of schooling. For instance, 60% of respondents are illiterate. Besides, when asked if they are interested in pursuing education through an open system, only 11% of the respondents

gave a positive response. Work dissatisfactions have been attributed to hard labor, lack of respect, meagre pay, and a lack of security. Thus, bodo women weavers are marginalized in society, as evidenced by the fact that the vast majority of them are unmarried.

According to Swargiary and Bodo (2017), when it comes to cultural pursuits, the Bodos are the most daring. As a result, weaving is an essential component of the bodo women as a way of their lives. It is believed that because bodo women are skilled weavers, it is difficult to marry one of them without having a background in weaving. In the Bodo society, she is referred to as Aluri (Unknown weaving art). These women use their family's handloom to weave the necessary clothing for the home while also creating beautiful garments. For instance, at the national level, the Bodo women's "Aronai" (traditional bodo scarf) weaving is highly regarded. Besides, the development of the family economy is greatly aided by the Bodo women. These women work in various fields, both inside and beyond the family, to further the financial interests of the family. In addition to their household duties, the Bodo women participate almost equally with men in all family-related farming and related activities.

According to Akhtar (2013), the younger Sualkuchi generations are unwilling to pursue weaving as a career due to the low profit margins and labor-intensive nature of the craft. As such, young women weavers that migrate to Sualkuchi to work as wage workers are the majority of the workforce. These women are primarily from the tribal populations in the surrounding regions, specifically Bodo and Rabha women. For instance, just 1% of these women respondents claim to have come to acquire more sophisticated weaving techniques, while 79.2% of them claim to have moved here in search of higher income, and 19.8% of them say they came because of conflict in their home villages. Besides, these weavers are the worst off since they are employed as contract, wage, or hired laborers and are also exploited by master weavers. Once they have mastered the finer points of weaving here, some settle down at Sualkuchi, while others establish their units after going back to their home villages or to other places.

According to Baishya (2016), around 80 percent of weavers in Sualkuchi are female out of which a sizable portion of women weavers are from other parts of the state. The Sualkuchi women weavers' educational and professional circumstances are unsatisfactory. The majority of weavers are from low-income families and are forced to weave. They deal with a lot of issues in their weaving profession, especially with regard to lodging, workload, and payment procedures. Moreover, the women are not aware of their social rights due to poor educational status. For eg. around 57% has attended primary level of schooling, while only 5% weavers has attended college education. It can be said that education is crucial for transforming a society's social structure and culture. Through education, people's intrinsic abilities, self-assurance, optimistic outlook, and learning capabilities are also shown. Besides, other problems faced by these women weavers include poor accommodation provided by their owners, frequent power outages

which significantly impede weaving activities, as well as increasing working hours and less income.

3. Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows-

- to assess the socio-economic condition of Bodo women weavers,
- to understand their problems,
- to offer suggestions for their socio-economic upliftment.

4. Methodology

The study is conducted with the use of secondary materials. Additionally, the exploratory technique is the primary foundation of the current study. A historical-cum-analytical approach has been used in this research to support the study's conclusions.

5. Analysis

5.1 Migrant workers in Sualkuchi

Sualkuchi's weaving community is multifaceted, unorganized, informal, and layered. The majority of the migrant hired weavers in Sualkuchi are from smaller towns and villages. They live in rented accommodations or with the owners of large handlooms. In Sualkuchi, hired weavers comprise over 60% of immigrant workers, the majority of whom come from underprivileged social backgrounds. These migrant weavers endure hard work schedules, little pay, and health issues brought on by the physically demanding nature of their line of work.

5.2 Historical Context of Bodo women weavers

The Bodos, an indigenous ethnic group in Assam, have a rich cultural heritage and history. Historically, they have been engaged in agriculture, but weaving has become an integral part of their livelihood, particularly in the Sualkuchi area. Weaving in Assam has deep cultural roots, with techniques passed down through generations. The Bodo women, inheriting this tradition, have been central to the weaving of traditional Assamese textiles, including the distinctive Muga silk. The economic significance of weaving in Sualkuchi cannot be overstated, as it forms a cornerstone of the local economy and cultural identity.

5.3 Economic Role of Bodo Women Weavers

In Sualkuchi, weaving is not just an art form but a vital economic activity. Bodo women weavers contribute significantly to this industry, often working in family-run enterprises or as part of small-scale units. The economic role of these women is multifaceted:

1. **Income Generation:** Weaving provides a primary source of income for Bodo women. The sale of traditional textiles supports not only the weavers but also their families. The income from weaving helps in meeting daily needs, including education and healthcare, and contributes to the overall economic stability of their households.
2. **Employment:** Many Bodo women are engaged in weaving as a full-time occupation. This provides them with a degree of financial independence, though the industry is often characterized by seasonal fluctuations and dependency on market demand. The work is generally conducted within the household or small community-based units, which limits the scale of operations but ensures that the traditional craft is preserved.
3. **Entrepreneurial Activities:** Some Bodo women have taken entrepreneurial steps by setting up small businesses related to weaving. These include boutiques, online sales platforms, and collaborations with larger firms. This entrepreneurial spirit has been a significant factor in the growth of the weaving sector, although challenges such as capital access and market competition persist.

5.4 Socio-Cultural Dynamics

The socio-cultural context significantly influences the lives of Bodo women weavers:

1. **Cultural Preservation:** Weaving is deeply intertwined with Bodo cultural practices. The textiles produced are not only commercial products but also bear cultural and ceremonial significance. Bodo women weavers are custodians of this heritage, ensuring that traditional designs and techniques are preserved and passed on to future generations.
2. **Social Status:** In Bodo society, weaving is traditionally a female-dominated activity. The role of women as weavers enhances their social status within the community. However, this status is often nuanced by broader societal structures, including gender roles and expectations. While weaving elevates the cultural status of women, it also places them in a role that is both celebrated and constrained by traditional expectations.
3. **Community Networks:** The weaving community in Sualkuchi is often organized into tight-knit networks. These networks provide support, share resources, and facilitate the exchange of skills and knowledge. Social cohesion within these networks helps women navigate challenges and leverage collective strengths, although it can also perpetuate certain social norms and practices.

5.5 Challenges Faced by Bodo Women Weavers

Despite the cultural and economic significance of their work, Bodo women weavers face several challenges:

1. **Economic Constraints:** The weaving industry in Sualkuchi is subject to economic pressures, including fluctuations in demand, competition from cheaper, mass-produced textiles, and the high cost of raw materials. These factors can impact the income and financial stability of Bodo women weavers. The industry's reliance on traditional methods also limits scalability and profitability.
2. **Market Access:** Access to broader markets remains a significant challenge. While some weavers have successfully ventured into national and international markets, many are constrained by limited marketing resources and inadequate infrastructure. This lack of access to markets can result in lower income and reduced economic opportunities.
3. **Technological Barriers:** The weaving process in Sualkuchi relies heavily on traditional techniques. While these methods are culturally valuable, they can also hinder efficiency and productivity compared to modern technology. The adoption of new technologies and practices is often slow, primarily due to financial constraints and resistance to change within traditional practices.
4. **Education and Skill Development:** Education and skill development are crucial for the advancement of women weavers. While many Bodo women are skilled in traditional weaving techniques, there is a need for enhanced training and education to improve their business acumen, technological skills, and market knowledge. Limited access to formal education and training programs can restrict their growth and development.
5. **Gender Inequality:** Despite their crucial role in the economy, Bodo women weavers often face gender-based discrimination. Traditional gender roles can limit their opportunities for leadership and decision-making within the weaving industry. Additionally, societal expectations and norms can impact their ability to pursue education and entrepreneurship.

6. Recommendations and Suggestions

- The Bodo women weavers will become more aware of their rights as they get more educated. Women will gain power as a result, raising societal consciousness
- Women weavers' workloads will be lessened when modern machinery is embraced
- Legislation is necessary to safeguard the migrant weavers, ensuring that they receive minimal pay and are never taken advantage of
- Training programs need to be imparted for raising weavers' productivity levels, which benefits the sector
- Reducing the working hours will lessen the weavers' workload
- The income of women weavers needs to be improved in order to maintain a decent and comfortable standard of living
- Better amenities for the weavers, such as food and housing, should be provided

- The women weavers should be given decent weaving work conditions and surroundings

7. Conclusion

The main purpose of the study is to find out the economic and social conditions of Bodo women weavers in the Sualkuchi development block. According to the study, Bodo women weavers have poor economic status, and their social standing is appalling. Besides, it can be said that due to the current intense rivalry in the market, and shifting environmental conditions, the traditional Sualkuchi handloom women weavers are at critical risk. Thus, these factors need to be addressed through timely interventions.

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