

CHAPTER – VII

HANDLOOM CULTURE IN HAJO – AN ANALYSIS

7.1 Status of Textiles

The research work has provided some ideas of the history, traditions, techniques, motifs and designs and costumes of various kinds of textiles production in Assam and particularly in Hajo circle. In the light of historic antecedents, an attempt is made in this chapter to provide an overview on the status of textiles with reference to past and present, changes in textile tradition, socio-cultural and socio-economic forces in the persistence of textile tradition and the role of textiles in cultural identity projection. Textile production is an aspect of culture in which traditions imprint heavily. Yet it would be wrong to say that the story of indigenous textiles is entirely one of persistence and continuity of old traditions. Over the years, numerous forces, emanating from external sources as well as from internal cultural dynamics among the generations, have brought about changes in various aspects of textile production. Changes and emerging orientations in textile production are all relevant issues in defining the status of textile in the present times.

7.1.1 Past and Present status of Textile Traditions

The handloom products of Assam are well known for their glorious heritage of artistry and fine workmanship. The traditional skill of the people of Assam in silk and cotton weaving is of a high order. The skill achieved brought worldwide acclaim for them. A unique feature of handloom weaving in Assam is the absence of any specific community or caste devoted only to weaving. Unlike in other parts of India weaving is practised universally by all sections of the indigenous populations of Assam. In Assam, textile production at home is the exclusive prerogative of the womenfolk. The only exception is Hajo circle or Sualkuchi handloom cluster, where men also undertake weaving. The traditional skill in handloom weaving has been handed down from generation and this

unbroken continuity of weaving at home has made the weavers ever more skilled. As a feminine craft, it is customary for the girls in Assam to learn the art of weaving from a tender age. There was a time not too long ago, when high or low social strata, was expected to know the art of weaving to make herself fit to be a bride. It was a status symbol and the Assamese womenfolk were proud of weaving fine fabrics out of homespun *eri*, *muga*, pat silks and cotton. This is more special in the Hajo circle. Many Assamese folksongs and myths as mentioned earlier bear ample testimony to the fine quality of textiles produced in the household looms. Glowing tributes were paid to Assamese womenfolk by different scholars for the creative and artistic genius in textile production.

In the recent years, weaving as a household craft has shown a tendency to gradually disappear among the educated households. Still, even today also the not only the womenfolk but almost every household regard weaving as an indispensable part of their culture. Weaving persists as a living craft in this region. As commented by the respondents who have their traditional experience that many families in this region have been saved from economic ruin by the labour of their womenfolk in the loom. There are numerous instances from all villages under study of widows without land and any other property being saved from destitution by the loom. Many among them have not only earned their livelihood by setting woven products or working in other people's looms, they have even supported the expenses of educating their children.

7.2 Changes in Textile Tradition – A comparative Assessment:

No living culture is static. As an element of culture, the craft of weaving has also been subjected to the universal laws of changes. As Herskovits (1955: 443-60) pointed out, changes is a universal cultural phenomenon, and the process of change over a period of time constitute the dynamics of culture. Change in any aspect of culture cannot be studied as an isolated phenomenon. For change, by and of itself is meaningless, until it is projected against the baseline of human behaviour and of a given time and nature. Herskovits further points out change must be contrasted to the phenomenon that is always opposed to it the

phenomenon of cultural stability. It is the persistence of the traditional content of culture that guarantees cultural stability. Weaving as a household craft in the region has changed that have come about in its various aspects from time to time.

It is also pertinent to remember that changes are not merely due to external influences but also due to internal dynamics of a culture, coming about through such mechanisms as innovations and discoveries.

7.3 Change in the craft of weaving

In the Hajo circle under study, handloom weaving continues as a living art and an integral part of household culture. It also provides an important prop to the economy of the region. It is evident from the field investigation that girls in the rural areas are associated with weaving even when they study in schools and colleges though the girls who are studying might not be able to devote as much time to weaving as the others. But in the towns and urban areas of Assam weaving as a part of domestic activity of women, more particularly of the school and college going girls is rarely to be seen. It is however noted with regard to the change that have taken place in the craft of weaving is that the traditional patterns persists among the weavers in the villages in the area.

It was observed in the course of field work that in the villages there were frequently 3 or even 4 looms in one household. It meant that just about every grown up girl or woman had a loom to herself. This clearly indicates the high value put on weaving in the area. It was observed that even 6/7 years old girls playing with toy looms. They are also encouraged by the elders to play such games. It is in this fashion that girls acquire an orientation and commitment to weaving and maintain the initiative throughout their lives. The persistence and continuity of respective textile tradition, particularly the active participation of grown-up girls in terms of preparation for married life by the girls. Even today, a girl has to equip herself with various items of dress and other cloths to be used in her future married life. This emphasis on producing one's own future requirements in cloths and dress items creates a lively interest in young girls in

weaving. Girls in the years before her marriage are to be seen avidly engaged in their looms. It was customary among all indigenous communities in Assam for the bride to weave the wedding attire herself and also for the bridegroom. Though this tradition is gradually on the way of disappearing from the Assamese culture, it is still in existence as an element of culture in the Hajo circle.

Economic considerations also aided the persistence of textile manufacture at home. The women not merely meet their own requirements, but also occasionally are able to sell some items to obtain cash for sundry expenditure of their own. In this way, it is apprehended that weaving as a part of women-centric culture has long been commercialised in the region. These centres have tried to revive the lost traits of indigenous textiles, with particular reference to motifs and designs, and incorporate these in large-scale manufacture of fabrics meant for sale. In this respect the craft has committed some changes in the following aspects.

7.4 Changes in respect of weaving practices

Due to the commercialisation of the industry, the traditional method of preparing the weaving has changed. In place of bobbinning with the help of winding yater, the new bobbinning machine has been implemented by the traders of textiles where 30/40 no bobbins has been winded at a time. There has been used the electronic winding yater to a very large extent. Most of the home used Dobbey machine of designing the fabric even in designing the *Gamocha* also.

7.4.1 Changes in respect of Raw Materials

Till the very recent past, cotton as well as all the three varieties of silk (eri, muga, pat) fabrics were produced by the indigenous weavers in the area. Cotton was grown as a household crop and spun into yarn to weave different textile items. The silk yarns were produced and used extensively in almost every homes. Pat and muga silk yarns is the most popular silk reared in the area under study.

However, many changes have also been incorporated in this aspect of material culture due largely to the impact of external factors. Such example of change is to be seen in the increasing popularity of acrylic and polyester yarns in the recent years. Easy availability of these yarns in varieties of colours and comparatively in low price are found to be the major reasons of this new adoption as expressed by the indigenous weavers. Since the weavers these days entirely depend on mill-made yarns, homogeneity in the use of common types of yarn is observed in all the villages under study.

Another example of change lies in the sphere of colour. Due to availability of yarns of varied hues, the range of colour has increased in the textiles of Assam and also in the study area. The wide choices of colour available in cotton and more particularly in acrylic and polyester yarns have often led the indigeneous weavers to produce textiles of variegated colours. These multi-coloured fabrics mark a departure from the age-old textiles and are not always aesthetically pleasing when compared with the textiles of traditionally defined colour-schemes.

Looms – Adoption of new technology and use of improved looms has been used by most of the weavers in the area. The ordinary throw-shuttle looms fitted with the fly-shuttle slay and few selected devices for ornamentation have been adopted in many homes among these weavers.

Designs – Changes in the motifs and designs from traditional geometric to recently adopted innovative and vivid patterns is noted in many cases. Since the innovative category of motifs does not contain symbolic meanings, as in the case with traditional motifs, the motifs combinations also become non-symbolic in nature.

As regards to the quality of the contemporary textiles produced by the indigenous weavers, a common view among elderly weavers and other knowledgeable persons in all the selected areas was observed. According to them the textile production in their respective weavers has been a sign of deterioration in respect of design, colour, aesthetics and overall workmanship. As a result of

commercialisation of the practices and the migration of new devices in the craft of weaving, the employment of the poor sections of the society as the helpers have lost their jobs to a large extent. This hampers the economy of the nation.

A comparison of old and contemporary handloom products of the indigenous weavers confirms such views and leads one to conclude that the status of textile production at household looms was much higher in the past than in the present. This demands for immediate attention and proper measures for the sustainable development of this indigenous craft of weaving.

As has already been pointed out, the silk industry of Hajo circle was existing since the days of Kautilya, i.e. the 4th century BC. Although this contention is hazy, the history may well be traced back at least to the 17th century AD as evidence by three chronicles of the Ahom era. In those days silk weaving was confined within the Tanti community as its domestic industry. It is also reported by the chronicles that the members of the community had woven fabrics for the kings and nobles also. Later on, specially during the Ahom period the industry had spread among other communities too as a national industry of Assam. However, the factory or workshop system in Sualkuchi is of recent origin. Some Mahajans had started workshops during the 2nd World War by engaging hired weavers. The profitability of the industry had attracted the attention of other communities too and now-a-days it had become the profession even of the fishermen and Brahmins. Since the 1970s silk looms started spreading to the villages under Hajo circle and leading to the growth of the present silk cluster or belt. During the field survey some questions had been put in the interview schedule and were asked the respondents regarding their problem facing as a means of commercialisation of the industry.

7.5 Problems of weaving practices

The industry has however, faced several problems a few of which are mentioned below –

1. **Yarn supply** – More than 60% of the looms are engaged in weaving mulberry yarn. One major problem faced by these looms are, regular supply of yarn at a reasonable price from Bangalore is not available. The price of yarn fluctuates from season to season. It is said that the dealers of Bangalore are well aware of the seasonal demand for yarn and during the busy season they raise the prices. Majority of the respondents complaints of sudden price rise during the peak season. Tasar yarn supply from Kolkata dealers has also taken the same trend. The people of the locality are demanding the setting up of a yarn Bank in the public sector for regular yarn supply at a reasonable price.

The *Muga* looms also face the problem of *Muga* cocoon supply. Cocoon supply depends on harvesting in the *Muga* growing areas and the harvest is dependent mainly on weather conditions. A better harvest raises cocoon supply in Sualkuchi for reeling more yarn for more looms. As a matter of fact the number of *Muga* looms rises or falls on the quality of cocoon supply. As mentioned by the respondents the irregular supply of yarn and *Muga* cocoons create problem to run the industry smoothly.

2. **Problems relating to Marketing** – Marketing has been a general problem faced by the handloom industry in India. since these products are known for rich marketing and meant for mass production and mass marketing. Moreover the weavers lacks the resources to advertise in the mass media on a large scale.

It was observed that the market for the products of sample entrepreneurs in the region was primary level in nature i.e. restricted to the state of Assam. But the Sualkuchi cluster is exception and its silk production is also exceptional which are able to cater international markets. Table-1 lists out the problem faced by the sample entrepreneurs relating to marketing.

Table-7.1

Nature of problems	Entrepreneurs ranking of problems	Percentage
Competition from power loom units	170	19.38
Slackness in demand	230	26.22
Competition from products made in neighbouring states/countries like china and Bangladesh	250	28.50
Problems of distribution	70	7.98
Low margin	50	5.70
Traders not giving good price for products	60	6.84
Limited resources for publicity, no special trade mark	57	6.50
Total	877	100.00

Data collected from field survey

The highest ranking problems was ‘competition from products made in neighbouring states/countries like china and Bangladesh’ from products made in neighbouring states/countries like China and Bangladesh’ with a rating of (28.50 percent) followed by ‘slackness in demand (26.22 percent) and ‘traders not giving good price for products’ (6.84 percent). The other problems cited were ‘problem of distribution’ (7.98 percent) competition from power looms (19.38 percent), “limited resources for publicity” (6.50 percent) ‘low margin’ with 5.70 percent rating.

The first rank was accorded to competition on the product they sell with the highest rating of (28.50 percent) 250 entrepreneurs have cited this as one of the important problems. It is observed that most of the enterprises sell their products through private agents. However some small weavers prefer to resort to direct selling in Guwahati mostly on door to door basis.

The problems in the field of marketing of handloom products, mostly exists because of current system drawbacks. There are few challenges for handloom because of changing market environment like globalization, industrialization and modernization. Timely intervention from government is required for a bright future in the handloom sector. Some major problems are -

Lack of availability of market information: There is no reliable information available regarding the marketing of handloom products. This creates hurdles of the market and resulting in unsatisfied customers. The weavers are unaware of the market demand and new designs and colours because of the lack of customers feedback. This hampers their creativity and innovations.

Lack of awareness about the product features: Handloom cloth is very soft and good for skin. It is non-allergic synthetic fibres. The use of vegetable dye makes it health friendly. One of the greatest characteristic is its flexibility to adopt according to the customers choice. It is more preferable because of its fine quality and added embroidery. The customer should be totally aware of these qualities of handloom and should be able to differentiate from the rest. Hence, awareness has to be generated in the customers mind, regarding the advantages of the products.

Insufficient promotion and advertisement of Handloom: Handloom sector is far lagging behind in promotion and advertising of its products as compared to the textile sector. Generally, promotion is done only through exhibitions and fairs with limited outlets. Hence, the customer purchases only when the goods are available and switches to the other competitive products when it is unavailable. Therefore this sector needs a continuous promotion and regular advertising campaign to have a durable and effective impact of the handloom products on the customer.

Lack of Quality standardization: The handloom in the region is famous for the production of the finest quality of cloth. It uses the unique selling proposition in many cases like designs. But the quality and standardization of the products is not regularly mentioned. Hence a procedure is needed for checking the quality,

standards of the products like durability, shrinking etc., so that the customer is assured about this. Also the government should take initiative and conduct research on the related issues.

Improper management of Handloom logistics: Handloom logistics should be done in a scientific way. There should be precise calculation of stock keeping and cost incurred in maintaining a huge stock. Generally insufficiency occur in case of finished products supply. Due to lack of improper marketing, the huge stock is blocked with marketers. Some of the co-operatives end up in loss because of mismanagement. This can be minimized by introducing adequate inventory management tools.

Tough competition: Handloom sector is facing a tough competition from various players in the market. The competition is intensive in both inter sector (from mill, power looms etc) and intra sector (from foreign countries like China, Bangladesh etc.). This increasing competition is the biggest challenges for the handloom sector. These centres have corrupted the designs and Motifs of Assam and basically Sualkuchi. They prepared fabrics than the fabrics made in the handloom centers of the region. The storehouses or shops in Guwahati or in Sualkuchi have a plentiful stock of such fabrics which have a good demand by the customers.

Thus marketing have been recognized as being central to the growth and development of handloom sector in the region. Domestic marketing is important for providing a link between the producer and consumer. The marketing and export promotion scheme is needed to promote the marketing of handlooms in the Hajo circle and to improve the levels of awareness among handloom weavers and the general public in the interest of overall development of the handloom sector. For promotion of handloom it is urged reduce the prices, increase availability, improve the quality, colour durability, innovative design, more varieties, latest fashion and trends, adequate advertising, online marketing, increasing awareness, special market survey for handloom products, customization and reduce intermediaries etc. to improve the satisfaction level of handloom customer.

3. **Problems relating to Finance** – Reference has been made to the financial requirements in Chapter – VI on investment. The local banks have financed 32% of the entrepreneurs whereas 36% entrepreneurs as per our sample survey are reportedly in need of credit for expanding their looms besides the Muga reelers and yarn winders being in need of financial help for starting new looms. But as the banks insist on hypothecation the poor having a little landed property fail to obtain credit. It may, however, be added in fairness that the experience of the bank officials in recovery of existing loans is ‘reportedly’ ‘very bad’, their non performing assets are rising year after year. It stood as a problem in the way of commercial weaving.
4. **Space for work sheds** – Space for construction of worksheds has posed another major problem. The small loom owners, particularly of village Sualkuchi are mostly using a part of the residential house and they have no land to construct even an ordinary house as workshed.
5. **Lighting** – Lighting the worksheds in the evening is another major problem of the weaving cluster. The workshops remain active from 8 AM in the morning to 10 PM in the evening. However the Assam State Electricity Board fails to supply power almost every evening. As a result power from private mini-generators are used by those who can afford a higher expense of Rs. 2 per tubelight of 40 watts, per day. The workshops of those who cannot afford this remain closed resulting in loss of fabric production to the loom owners and income to the wage weavers. 40% of the sample entrepreneurs had complained of this problem.
6. **Labour shortage** – The most formidable problem faced by the industry is however, the problem of labour supply. In this context it may be recalled that more than 24% of the looms (4619) were found inactive during our survey from February to August 2014. No doubt many of these looms remained idle due to slack seasonal fall in demand for fabrics. But 51% of the sample entrepreneurs had reported the problem of non-availability of weavers. It may

be recalled that 72.13% (1387) of the weavers are mostly hired migrants from distant villages, particularly 27.87% (5343) of Bodo weavers come from different districts of the state. It may be recalled that 19.5% of the hired weavers have come to the cluster either not linking agricultural jobs or just for remaining out of home while 80.5 have come for financially supporting their families. These 19.5% of the weavers remain migrant, i.e., they would work for a few months in a loom and taking some advance money from the loom owner would go home with a promise to come back, but would never return. Hence their looms remain idle. It is a fact that the weavers remain in debt as they take one after another advance on the eve of Durga Puja or Magh Bihu and Bohag Bihu (respectively Harvesting and Assamese New Year's festivals) after repaying a part of the previous advance. As has been pointed out earlier, 61% of the weavers hail from agricultural labour families and 28% from petty trader families (the rest 11% are from marginal peasant families). They take advances to support their families as well as to lead, by imitating the surrounding standard of life, and a quest for material possessions, etc. The system of advance does not mean that the loom owner encourages the weavers to remain in debt; rather 32% of them had complained that part of their advances could not be recovered as the weaver could not be traced after she had reportedly gone home. If one loom owner refuses to pay advance to the weavers, she leaves the workshop and joins another owner who being in need of a weaver pays an amount as advance and in this way there exists some type of competition too among the loom owners themselves for hiring weavers.

Moreover, many of the weavers are irregular in attending the looms. They come late in the morning and leave early in the evening besides absence for several days. During the Durga puja festival and the two Bihus (Magh and Bohag) most of them remain absent for 20/25 days at a stretch, hence they work about 9 months in a year taking into account other holidays or wilful absence. According to the respondents, this is why the annual income of about 54% does not exceed Rs. 12000, the regular 42% earn about Rs. 15000 while the hard working ones

earn about Rs. 18000. It may be noted that from amongst the local hard working weavers of the cluster has emerged a large number of present day master weavers.

As regards employer-employee relations it may be noted that all the hired weavers work on contract system as wages are paid on piece rates. Hence there is no system of appointment; weavers come and go rather than being hired and fired. It is also worth observing that almost all the workshops are attached to the loom owner's household. Hence the weaver comes into direct contact with the members of the family of the master weaver. In case dealings of the proprietor or his wife and children are not cardinal, the weaver usually does not like to work in that workshop. As a matter of fact 61% of the sample weavers were reportedly provided free lodge by the proprietors while 36% were living in rented houses and the rest 3% were living in their own homes. Moreover all most all the weavers reported that the Mahajan as they call him was helpful in their distress. Such coordinational relations and leaving the workshop without repaying the advance seem inconsistently, but human character is variegated and complex. Some does not repay wilfully while some are compelled by pecuniary circumstances.

In this way the weaving industry always suffers in labour storage.

7. **Technological Upgradation** – Technological upgradation is another aspect of the industry to which the researchers made an emphasis. Silk weaving is done in the fly shuttle loom which was introduced in Sualkuchi during the 2nd World war. The looms of the cluster are also weave traditional fabrics mainly for the Assamese female customers. But production of non-traditional fabrics for Indian and foreign markets would have certainly created more employment avenues as well as generated more income among the employers and employees. While the traditional handlooms may remain for weaving traditional fabrics, semi-automatic handlooms and simple powerlooms may certainly be used for weaving silk as well as non-silk fabrics. It may be recalled that almost every inch of non-silk fabric like long-cloth, shirting, printed blouse pieces, sarees etc. Used in Assam as well as in the North Eastern region are imported from outside the state. Introduction of simple

powerlooms can certainly meet a portion of the demand, but no incentive has been taken by any entrepreneur in this direction. The use of Jacquard machine has also been found negligible during the time of field survey.

8. **Loom Accessories** – There are also some minor problems relating to weaving industry can be mentioned. Reeds used in the looms are imported from Mumbai and plastic bobbins are supplied by dealers of Amritsar. Dobbys used in the looms for weaving designs on the fabrics and a very little use of Jacquard machine for making boarder design, and the cards for punching the designs as well as nylon cords and ropes are supplied from Benaras. In Assam not a single unit of these industries has been set up by any entrepreneur while lakhs of rupees are spent in importing these items.

Thus the industry has faced several problems. Regular mulberry yarn supply at a reasonable price, Muga cocoon supply for reeling Muga yarn supply of Tasar yarn and art threads are the common problems. Distress sale by the poor weavers during seasonal fall in demand adversely affected their enterprises. Institutional finance is needed by the small loom owners to expand their number of looms and the poor Muga reelers and yarn winders also need finance to set up at least one loom. The problem of space is faced by the loom owners of the region in setting up worksheds. Most irregular power supply for lighting the workshops as well as the residences is a problem faced by all whether having or not having looms. Moreover, the labour shortage for the looms has stood as a formidable problem and many looms remain idle for non-availability of weavers. The question of technological upgradation is mainly motivational and risk taking and the same is the issue of product diversification. In spite of these problems, the weaving industry in the region is thriving since long, and is expanding thanks to the growing customerism for traditional products.

Photo Plate No. 7.1 Modern Technology of Weaving Practices



Polyster Yarn easily available in shops



Bobbinig Machine



Jacquard Machine (weaving of Khashi Dhara in Sualkuchi)