

# Analyzing the Role of Handicraft and Handloom in Empowering Women in Assam

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**Abstract:** This research paper tries to explore the intricate relationship between empowerment of women through traditional handloom and handicrafts, and cultural viability in Assam. The state's traditional fabrics such as Muga, Eri, and Pat silk are not only world-renowned but have received Geographical Indications (GI). Focusing on the age-old craft of weaving, it analyses how traditional handloom activities, particularly involving Muga and Assam silk, empower women economically and socially. Based on qualitative methodologies, including interviews and observation, the study reveals how women artisans have been playing a crucial role in preserving Assam's cultural identity and sustaining states own knowledge systems. Crafts have been a crucial aspect of women's lives and have held a notable role in their economic and social advancement. In addition to updated statistical inputs from 2022, the paper also evaluates government initiatives, challenges faced by artisans, and emerging trends in the weaving sector. Their skill is not restricted to the State, yet gaining recognition globally, enabling greater participation of women. the sector and provide their input. Our Identity is our Culture, and the weaving industry in the State significantly contributes to maintaining the cultural identities of the State via tapestry creation. Finally, we can sum up that handicrafts and handloom promote intergenerational cultural continuity in addition to providing women with economic independence.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Handloom, Handicrafts, Cultural Identity, Assam.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Assam, one of the eight states that constitute India's North Eastern Region (NER), is renowned for its extensive weaving culture. In Assam almost 84% of people live in rural regions, Assam's socioeconomic fabric has historically incorporated the handicraft and handloom industries. In Assam, weaving is not just a simple economic activity and is frequently done at the household level, especially by women. It represents communal identity, generational wisdom, and cultural symbols. While historically confined to the domestic sphere, women artisans are now redefining their roles as contributors to the economy, entrepreneurs, and cultural custodians. The state's traditional fabrics such as **Muga, Eri, and Pat silk** are not only world-renowned but have received Geographical Indications (GI). Thousands of women are supported by these crafts, which also provide a platform for the intersection of empowerment and tradition. Assamese culture, which is distinguished by its rich history of craftsmanship and indigenous weaving techniques, has always placed a high value on crafts. In addition to numerous other crafts, Assam is well known for its exquisite handwoven fabrics, metal crafts, ceramics, and wickerwork (Ramswamy,

2013). These crafts help the indigenous tribes maintain their creative identity in addition to being a source of income. In Assam, the crafts sector has become a vital tool for empowering women and promoting creative sustainability because to the expanding push for women's empowerment through active participation in craft and weaving and craft related works. The importance of crafts in promoting women's empowerment, their impact on the sustainability of the arts, and the challenges faced by this hard work in Assam (Devi, 2013). Crafts have played a significant role in women's economic and social growth and have been an integral part of their life.

The indigenous crafts of Assam are basically dominated by women, they are engaged in multiple activities of the production process, such as spinning, dyeing, and weaving (Devi, 2013). This diligence creates job opportunities, particularly in rural regions, where women's options are restricted. choices for employment (Kashyap, 2018). Traditionally, women in Assam have been restricted to the home environment, however, by participating in the handicraft industry, they have established a voice and built self-assurance. It seems that you haven't finished your

request. Please provide the text you'd like me to paraphrase. tradition and wisdom handed down from their mothers and grandmothers have been a source of pride and a method to affirm their creative identity.

Assamese textile patterns have historically drawn influence from the epics and nature, featuring notable Geometric/ floral patterns created in visual shades for traditional clothing. Brindavani textiles were the most Famous traditional Assamese textiles, featuring designs that depict various representations of God Vishnu. Kimkhwab, Boro diamond, Ohol jonberi, Cosa sazia, Miri, and Hatipati designs are currently employed for ethnic. fabrics and encompass geometric, floral, nature-themed, and classic festivities. Through the functioning of equipped Looms, the creation of classic fabric patterns in the prevailing handloom industry has been noted. over the two decades following India's independence (Gadey, 2020). The primary conventional aspects of the area garments include Mekhla-Chadar, dhoti-kurta, dokhna, sarees, riha, and japi, all of which utilize extensive amounts of Assamese traditional designs for embellishing fabric. This piece features an exploration of traditional Assamese culture. fabric designs, along with their application in the handloom industry for ethnic and traditional clothing in the region (Gadey, 2020). Assam, the birthplace of authentic Northeast Handloom products, excels in various crafts and crafts such as club and bamboo crafting, sitalpith, workshops for brass and bell ssence, ivory, and woodworking. shola core, pottery, and textile art. It is also recognized for its distinctive silks, ethe most eye-catching and infamous of which is Muga. segment from Muga, Pat, and Eri/ Endi the cloth of harmony.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyze the role of handloom and handicrafts in empowering women in Assam.
- To study the contribution of women weavers to the preservation of Assam's cultural heritage.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative and explanatory in nature. It uses secondary data from government reports, academic publications, news articles, and online sources. Observations and interviews from field visits complement the secondary information to validate findings.

## IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

India's handcraft item account only a small share of the global handicrafts market, but this sector has the potentiality to grow at significant rate. (Fabeil, 2012). The experts of this sector estimated that the sector car grow at a faster rate than previous time. Moreover, the demand for handicraft products growing day by day in present time. In fact, it contributes one-third of its import potential to the United States, which was valued at 647.57 billion globally in 2020 and is expected to increase by 10.9% in 2022–2027 (Rahman, 2019).

The main factors contributing to the perception of women as they are the weakest segments of society are the dominance of Patriarch society and gender isolation, which has contributing significantly in the decline of moral standards of Woman's (Bhat,2018). Owing to the fact that they were consistently seen as deprived and underprivileged section of the society. By providing equitable opportunities to them, a large number of Handloom and handicrafts business firm helping them in improving their standard of life and financial security (Rahman, 2019).

By including women in colourful crafts, conditioning, and supplementary production, the policy of empowering women is being started. Women receive training in the crafts industry, which will help them find job. By giving them with financial support, this small-scale research can also assess the political disciplines (Heider, 2019). The workplace culture is undoubtedly important since it may foster in women a sense of equality with men and a sense of agency. Usually, women are focusing on defying colorful programs to hone their skills and improve their creative position, which would promote frugality (Laine, 2021). By emphasizing increasing women's profitable culture along with offering plenty of chances to improve it in accordance with women's socio-profitable conditions, handcraft assiduity has attempted to improve the status of women (Laine, 2021). In the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the establishment of innumerable craft shops has created a wealth of opportunities for women to become more active in their lives. Women are able to establish new paths in their professional development thanks to this new feature of productive openings (Khanduri, 2021).

According to the Nineteenth Century Industrialization & Colonial Penetration, Assamese women were solely responsible for producing silk (Goswami, 2012). Family women were primarily responsible for spinning and weaving cotton and silk to make clothing for certain purposes. Assamese handloom assiduity, particularly that of the Sualkuchi.in the malignancy of the many competing synthetic fibers and shiny textiles (Bhuyan, 1985). Effects of G.S.T. on Sualkuchi's silk assiduity, altering requests for economical living, and so forth. The contribution of women working in the handloom industry to the handloom fabric products (Sarmah, 2006).

The fashionable pastoral assiduity that provides jobs and generates cash in pastoral areas is sericulture, which is the foundation upon which silk assiduity thrives. In the face of the increasing ecological decline around us, it also aids in the creation of a hmanized niche of green cover (Prasen, 2008). In his book, he made the case that in an agriculturally frugal region like Assam, cabin and handwoven diligence are extremely important. Sualkuchi's assiduity on the handloom presents strength challenges (Shaieka, 2023).He emphasized the extremes of handlooms, their modernization, open requests, the rising costs of silk accessories, the effects of G.S.T. on Sualkuchi's silk assiduity, changing request frugality, and other issues. The percentage of women working in the handloom industry who produce handloom fabrics (Sarmah,2006).

According to Phukan (2012), India's handloom sector produces 19% on the country's total production of textile, also helps in the earning of Valuable foreign currency by exporting handloom products. In addition to Suwalkuchi's evolving modest lifestyle, other factors include the Suwalkuchi's societies, socio-political life, religious

morality, education and handloom production method (Sharan2020). Handlooms are an old age craft that contribute significantly to job creation. Handloom and Handicrafts alone creating over 4.4 million direct and indirect jobs in India. In 2018, a total of US\$355.91 worth of handloom products were exported (Foundation,2020).

## V. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### A. Current Data Snapshot (2022 Update)

As per the **4th Handloom Census (2019–20)** and subsequent updates from the **Government of Assam (2022)**:

**Table 1: Data of Handloom and Handicraft Sector in Assam ( 2022)**

Particulars	Units (Approx.)
No. of Handloom Households	12.89 lakh
No. of Handloom Weavers	13.02 lakh
No. of Female Weavers	11.85 lakh
No. of Handlooms	12.53 lakh
No. of SHG/JLG-based Weavers	1.70 lakh
No. of Weavers Producing Mekhela-Chadar	6.22 lakh
No. of Weavers Using Muga Silk Yarn	55,120
Registered Women Artisans (Handicraft)	58,472 ( 2022)

Source: Directorate of Handloom & Textile, Assam, 2022

### B. Empowerment Through Livelihood

Weaving provides both **full-time and part-time employment** for women, especially in rural Assam. A woman weaver typically supports her household through this skill and contributes to Assam's GDP. The **average working days per weaver is about 171 annually**, but earnings depend on market exposure and material access. Initiatives like **Aagor Daagra Afad** (Bodo Women's Collective) show how collective entrepreneurship can enhance women's voices. These groups now participate in national fashion events like **Lakmé Fashion Week**, bringing global attention to indigenous designs.

### C. Cultural Preservation

Muga silk is the unique tradition of Assam, which has a GI tag, represents cultural identity. Cultural memory can be preserved by way of the weaving of traditional design elements for weddings, Bihu, and community festivals. Weaving customs are upheld by most of the tribal communities of Assam especially, the Mising, Bodo, and Tiwa, frequently starting early. The mekhela, or weaved clothing Chador, gamocha, riha, and dokhona all reinforce heritage through their practical and symbolic uses.

## VI. CHALLENGES

Despite the development of handicrafts and weaving culture with the support and patronage of government of Assam, the women weavers of the state have been facing systemic difficulties in this sector. Following are the main difficulties-

### A. Limited Access to Capital and Markets.

Majority of the weavers come from the rural areas or semi-urban area, where there is scarcity of financial institution or formal credit institutions. Many artists are unable to get loan from banks or cooperative loans because they lack formal education, have bad credit, and lack of collateral. They consequently depend on village moneylenders who impose very high rate of interest, resulting in a debt cycle. Furthermore, they have restricted access to both home and foreign markets. Many craftspeople rely on intermediaries who keep a large portion of the revenues. Additionally, they are not exposed to international or metropolitan markets where there may be a significant demand for genuine handmade goods with the right logistics and branding.

### *B. Duplication of Handloom Designs by Machine-Made Fabrics*

Mass manufacturing facilities frequently use machines to copy traditional handloom designs, providing the market with less expensive alternatives. These machine-made textiles are more appealing to budget-conscious consumers because they are not only more accessible but also less costly as compared to handmade items. Original handloom goods consequently lose their competitive advantage in terms of cost and accessibility. This reduces the market for real handcrafted goods and deters craftspeople from pursuing their trade, undermining the handloom's authenticity and cultural significance.

### *C. Inadequate Training in Digital Marketing and Design Innovation*

In the modern digital world, online is one most important means to reach the potential customers of the products. But many craftspeople lack the technical skills which necessary to use digital marketing and payment systems, social media, or e-commerce platforms. They are unable to properly market their goods or connect with a worldwide audience. Furthermore, their items might not appeal to current consumers if they are not properly trained in the latest advancements and fashion trends. The worth and appeal of their creations can be greatly increased by bridging this gap through collaboration with experienced designers and training in digital tools.

### *D. Lack of Organized Credit and Minimal Insurance/Social Security Benefits*

Due to the handloom industry's informal nature, many weavers are not covered by formal welfare scheme of the government and financial institutions. Only few producer groups or cooperatives exist to bargain for improved conditions on marketing, raw materials, or loans. Weavers continue to face financial instability as a result. In addition, social safety nets such as health insurance, pension plans, or accident insurance are either non-existent or inadequately administered in this sector on the economy. These workers are extremely vulnerable at times of crisis, such as natural disasters, illness, or loss of employment. Additionally, even while there is state assistance, it is dispersed and frequently unavailable to isolated or aboriginal populations.

## **VII. GOVERNMENT AND NGO INITIATIVES**

Some recent programs enhancing women's engagement in weaving include:

### *A. Silk Samagra Scheme by the Central Silk Board for Eri and Muga Promotion*

The *Silk Samagra* scheme is an umbrella initiative launched by the Central Silk Board under the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. Its objective is to promote the holistic development of sericulture in the country, including the entire silk value chain—from host plant cultivation to silk yarn production, processing, and marketing.

In Assam, the scheme has had a significant focus on **Eri** and **Muga** silk—both indigenous to the region. Key components include:

- Make necessary arrangement to plant cultivation for supply of raw silk, like (Som and Soalu for Muga).
- Establish Research and development Institutions for disease control and productivity enhancement.
- Provide training to the weavers and rearers in production and capacity building.
- Infrastructure support like reeling units, cocoon banks, and marketing outlets.

The above mentioned scheme plays a vital role in preserving the unique identity of Assam silk and empowering rural silk farmers and weavers.

### *B. One District One Product (ODOP).*

The program launched under the Pradhan Mantri Formalization of Microfood Processing Enterprises (PMFME) Scheme and subsequently matched with more comprehensive economic strategies, the ODOP program seeks to pinpoint and advance a single market niche. Muga silk from the Kamrup area of Assam has been chosen for this program because of its significance in terms of culture, economy, and history. The program offers:

- Marketing and branding assistance.
- Development of weaving cluster infrastructure.
- Financial and technical support for entrepreneurs and craftspeople.
- Facilitation of exports and market connections.

By making Muga Kamrup's hallmark product, ODOP improves artisan livelihoods and the local economy while increasing its national and international awareness.

### *C. State Handloom and Textiles Policy (2022)*

The Assam government introduced **State Handloom and Textiles Policy (2022)** to revamp and modernize the state's handloom and textile sector. The **2022 policy** includes a comprehensive framework focusing on:

- Digitization: Promoting e-commerce platforms for weavers, encouraging digital catalogues, and facilitating online payments.
- Credit Support: Simplifying loan processes and offering subsidized interest rates for weavers and cooperative societies.
- Skill Upgradation: Organizing training programs in modern design techniques, natural dyeing, and product diversification. It also supports setting up Common Facility Centres (CFCs), encouraging youth participation, and introducing insurance schemes. This policy is a major step toward integrating traditional handloom with modern entrepreneurship models.

NGOs like **North East Network (NEN)** and enterprises like **Weaver Bird** and **Rang Sutra** support digital platforms and fair wages for women weavers.



### VIII. FINDINGS

The women in the State enjoy financial independence, and numerous are decision-makers, which enhances their empowerment. They not only establish their position. They not only generate income for themselves but also contribute to the State's GDP. It seems that your request was cut off. The aforementioned discussion indicates that the weaving industry empowers women in the State. Their skill is not restricted to the State, yet gaining recognition globally, enabling greater participation of women. The sector and provide their input. Our Identity is our Culture, and the weaving industry in the State significantly contributes to maintaining the cultural identities of the State via tapestry creation. Sporting the handloom products of the State not only makes them feel proud, and it is also esteemed by the community for preserving their culture even after centuries. Muga Silk, renowned as the most prestigious silk of the State, received its GI tag in 2009 and is the largest woven silk of the condition. Sualkuchi serves as the center for Muga Silk production in the state.

Assam has the largest number of women weavers in the country with the count of a 11,79,507 weavers. The state has 58,114 registered women artisans with the office of the Handloom Development Commission. Since the earliest days, the women of the state widely recognized for their proficiency in needle work. Furthermore, they were proficient in the art of combining raw cotton with the silk. Cotton was used to weave endi or eri. Cotton and stroke silk are rarely combined, but they are often paired with muga, churi and riha with similar accessories were normally produced (Arts, 2019).

- Women in Assam have not only upheld their **economic independence** through handloom but have also evolved into **designers, trainers, and entrepreneurs**.
- Handloom-based collectives promote **community cohesion, gender equality, and heritage education**.
- The craft's linkage with cultural identity makes every woven piece a symbol of **Assamese pride and resilience**.

### IX. SUGGESTIONS

#### ➤ *Policy Integration:*

Effective development of the handloom sector requires coordination among various government schemes across weaving, MSMEs, and cultural ministries. A unified policy approach can maximize resource utilization, avoid duplication, and ensure holistic support for artisans.

#### ➤ *Technology Upgradation:*

Craftspeople will have access to larger markets and be able to command fair pricing and recognition on a worldwide scale by establishing robust rural-to-global market pathways through collaborations with e-commerce giants, online exhibitions, and digital storytelling.

#### ➤ *Market Linkages:*

Creating strong rural-to-global market pathways through partnerships with e-commerce giants, online exhibitions, and digital storytelling will give artisans access to broader markets, helping them earn fair prices and international recognition.

#### ➤ *Skill and Design Training:*

Arrangement of frequent training sessions at the community level that concentrate on color theory, pattern creation, and contemporary branding can equip weavers with the skills they need to adapt to shifting market expectations and innovate, increasing the competitive advantage of their manufacturing processes.

#### ➤ *Awareness Drives:*

Handloom items can be made more visible through national marketing and tourism-related integration (e.g., handloom trails, local craft fairs). Encouraging government-certified handloom labels can boost demand and foster customer trust.

#### ➤ *Monitoring and Certification:*

The originality of historic designs can be preserved by establishing certification programs run by the cooperatives. Additionally, this would preserve the authenticity of local crafts and deter imitation by manufactured goods.

#### ➤ *Youth Involvement:*

Young people can be attracted to the skill if weaving and textile design are included in high school and college level as vocational courses. This guarantees the sector's modernization, skill transfer, and long-term employment prospects for coming generations.

### X. CONCLUSION

In Assam, weaving is more than just a custom; it is a potent tool for social change, cultural expression, and economic advancement. Women have been at the forefront of this practice both historically and currently. They support cultural preservation and state GDP in addition to home income through handlooms and handicrafts. Assamese women weavers have the potential to become worldwide ambassadors of indigenous heritage if they receive consistent support in the areas of training, market growth, and digital integration. Assamese women are exceptionally talented in weaving, handicrafts, handloom work, and creation. Weaving has been a part of their daily lives since ancient times and is essential to meeting their basic needs as well as other financial obligations. Home weaving is still a tradition that is passed down from one generation to the next, helping the state preserve its culture. In addition to being financially independent, women in the state provide employment opportunities for other women. They play a crucial role in maintaining the State's traditional weaving, artistry, and craftsmanship while advancing the State's cultural heritage by supporting creativity and profitable growth for both their community and the State overall.

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