

SILK PRODUCTS AND MARKETING STRATEGY OF A WEAVING INDUSTRY IN ASSAM

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: The present paper attempts to trace the development of the weaving industry in Sualkuchi in the Kamrup district of Assam and tries to understand the organizational structure of the Sualkuchi weaving Industry. The paper also tries to identify the avenues of silk products and their marketing.

Methodology: In the present research work, an exploratory research design has been adopted. For the primary data, the respondents were selected using purposive sampling and were administered with an interview schedule. Secondary data are collected from Government reports, books, journals and so on.

Main Findings: The products produced are mainly used for commercial purposes only. As the handloom industry of Sualkuchi is not thoroughly organized and marketing agencies are diverse, the majority of the weavers rely on middlemen to sell their finished products. A sense of professionalism among the weavers and artisans, creation of facilities for easy and quick marketing of hand-woven products is necessary. The unusual sudden price rise in yarn brings untold misery to the industry in the area as production is against advance orders at a predetermined price. There is a need to innovate designs to capture the global market.

Applications: This research work can be used by students, academicians, policymakers and also government agencies for the upliftment and development of small scale industries.

Novelty/Originality: The study provides new insight into the problem which might help in formulating policies and programs for the development of this industry, which is technically not always possible. Sociological insights must be made to the existing program for development.

Keywords: Marketing, Weaving Industry, Handloom, Silk Products, Product Diversification, Organizational Structure.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing sets the consumption patterns and gives new direction and dimension to the production process. According to [Niranjana \(2006\)](#), marketing practices offer insights into understanding how persons, organization and firms negotiate the market in different ways. The key to the survival of handlooms ultimately is the “Market”. If there is genuinely no demand for handloom products, no government initiatives and spending can keep the sector going. The Sualkuchi handloom units comprise of small handloom owners, paid weavers and independent weavers. There are numerous marketing agencies for handloom fabrics at Sualkuchi. In the changing phase of today’s trend, handloom products of Sualkuchi, being primarily traditional meet stiff competition from products of large-scale sectors and power looms. It is now important that within the state, to make the stand of handloom products more strong, the development of marketing facilities has become an integral part. Otherwise, any amount of aid given to the industry at the production level will amount to a waste of national resources

As said by [Das \(1986\)](#) in his work that Assam’s handloom weavers are indeed a band of creative artisans in the sense that they pour their entire souls into the job. He further said that apart from being a source of livelihood, weaving is woven into the very cultural heritage of Assamese society. Nowadays many weavers who work independently come into an agreement for some predetermined period with the middlemen on a wage basis. According to this contract, the amount of yarn as required by the weaver will be supplied by the middleman and the weaver on completion of weaving the product will return it to him and get the wages. Handloom products are largely marketed in the State by co-operative societies and Apex society.

The objective of the study

The paper tries to understand the organizational structure of the Sualkuchi weaving Industry. An attempt has also been made to highlight the problems faced by the industry and analyses certain issues for the development of the silk industry. The paper tries to identify the avenues of silk products and its marketing and gives a detailed description of looms usage, process and production, investments, product diversification and so on for the improvement of the industry.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many studies were made on industrial organizations and the marketing of handloom and textile industries. [Vadarajan \(2008\)](#) in her work deals with the different categories of silkworm and tried to determine their regional diffusion in India. She also tried to trace the route and raised the question of whether silk was brought to India from China or it was indigenous to this country. “Silk weaving is not uncommon in other parts of Assam, but Sualkuchi claims a technique,

quality and reputation of its own which are unique in so far as muga and pat silk fabrics are concerned” as said by (Bhattacharjee, 2014). Baishya (2005) highlighted the decaying condition of traditional industries in his book and advocated modernization so that the socio-economic system does not face labor alienation. Phukan (2012) in his work analyses that the muga silk industry of Assam has been an integral and important element in the socio-economic life of Assam from time immemorial. His study covers historical perspectives, the trend, and level of production, the marketing channels, socio-economic conditions of stakeholders, land use patterns, economic impacts, problems, and prospects. Bhattachayya & Goswami (2015) discusses the pre-cocoon and post cocoon activities in sericulture and muga silk weaving industry of Assam and reveals about the potential employment generating capacity of this industry in various stages. Singer (1972) in his work argues that traditional society and machine technology are not necessarily in conflict. He says that the resources of the joint family enable some of its members to acquire specialized education and the technical training necessary for the management of industry. He further said that compartmentalization is an adaptive process that permits Indian to combine the modes of thought and behavior of modern industry with traditional modes of thought and behavior without too direct collision. Begum (2003) in her work analyzed that Assam’s silk is not yet reckoning in terms of its export earnings due to its inadequate production base and the poor ratio of productivity. She also said that the Eri and Muga industry of Assam, if developed in the right direction, could become the launch vehicle to carry the state to the international silk market and the realm of growth and progress. Goswami (1990) in his work examines the current state of India’s textile industry. According to him industrial sickness - and the need for restructuring, reorganization, and strategic withdrawal - is as pervasive in the private sector as it is in the public. According to him, industrial sickness arises out of the bad financial structure and/or chronically inefficient use of factors of production and/or poor market positioning. Mahto (2002) in his paper discussed certain strategies to market India’s muga and eri silk products in a global market where the organization like WTO is working and also advocated several strategies for the market promotion of muga and eri silk products. Dutta & Nanavaty (2007) in their work did a comprehensive study on the future of silk and said that through the 21st century is quite bright. He explained that though consumption is likely to rise despite its high prices-the question is whether silk production will keep pace with the shooting demand. Jain & Ratan (2017) in their research work developed a conceptual model that fulfills the goals of the distributed economy and preserves the sustainability of the handloom silk industry in Assam by involving NGOs for which comprehensive planning is required. Hazarika et al. (2016) in their paper reveals that technological upliftment is important to achieve and sustain competitiveness. They analyzed that proper market linkage is crucial for adopting and using weaving technologies in rural areas. Khatun (2016) in her work studied the ‘Make in India’ program which is designed and initiated by the Government of India to promote India as a global manufacturing infrastructure and says that this campaign is going to become a landmark for Indian handloom and textile sector through innovative designs and products. The silk weaving community of Sualkuchi should adopt certain strategies that will enable the industry to compete with the modern textile market.

METHODOLOGY AND THE FIELD

In the present research work, an exploratory research design has been adopted. The study is exploratory as the problem of the research has not yet been studied clearly and sufficient information is not available about the issue. The respondents for the present study are of four types- the owners of silk looms, the independent weavers, the paid weavers, and Government officials. Primary data from a total of 160 respondents were interviewed. Out of these 160 respondents, 40 are owners of silk looms, 10 independent weavers and 100 are paid, weavers. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling and were administered with an interview schedule. The views and opinion of the respondents on their respective working status and living conditions is taken into account. In addition to owners of silk looms and weavers as respondents to the study, 10 Government officials under Central and State Government were also selected for the present study. Secondary data are from Government reports of the Government Organizations/Departments i.e. Central Silk Board, Regional Office, Guwahati; Regional Silk Technological Research Station, Guwahati, and Handloom & Textile Department, Ambari, Guwahati

Sualkuchi chosen for the present study is known as the largest silk weaving village of North –East India located at a distance of about 30 km from Guwahati city of the Kamrup district in Assam and is situated on the bank of the mighty river the Brahmaputra. It is located at latitude 26°10’12” N of the equator and longitude 91°34’11” E of the prime meridian on the world map and is at an altitude 37 m. Sualkuchi is considered the ‘Benchmark’ of commercial handloom production units of Assam. It is said that Mahatma Gandhi during his visit to Assam in 1921 was so moved that he remarked: “Every Assamese woman is a born weaver.....and that she could weave fairy tales in her loom”. Sualkuchi is the textile center of Assam and is known as ‘The Manchester of Assam’. The entire population here is engaged in weaving exquisite silk fabrics and allied activities

The handloom sector has significant cultural and economic ramifications for the ethnic groups in Assam. Local women are well-known for their dexterity in their looms. It is said that weaving tradition traced back to the 11th century when King Dharampal of the Pala Dynasty sponsored the craft and brought 26 weaving families from Tantikuchi to Sualkuchi. The hamlet developed into a weaving village only after the Ahoms occupied Sualkuchi, defeating Mughals in the mid 17th Century. Weaving has since thrived in Sualkuchi earning it the sobriquet, ‘Manchester of the East’ (Talukdar, 2008). It has now become a way of life in Sualkuchi, and home without loom here is beyond imagination.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Organizational Structure of the Silk Weaving Centre

The industrial scenario of Sualkuchi is depended on the role played by the handloom weaving sector. This hand weaving industry is based on traditional customs, practices and heredity knowledge of the silk weavers. "One of the important features of this silk industry is that of the involvement of all the family members in weaving and allied activities. In the handloom industry, the entire work from the pre weaving process to the weaving of the cloth is shared by different members of the family, including women and children" ([Kudri & Thakur, 2014](#)). The wheel of the handloom industry revolves around the weaver and his family. This industry provides a job to all members of the family thus helps the people in improving their standard of living and to escalate themselves to a slightly higher social layer. The human factor is, therefore, an important aspect of the successful development of this industry. As revealed by [Phukan \(2010\)](#) in his work that most of the factories are equipped with semi-automated fly-shuttle looms for weaving silk fabrics. The handloom owners gradually turned into small factory owners and they hire employees to work in their looms and lead the industry. The transformation of an earlier working-class (weavers) to entrepreneurs (master weavers) has also generated job opportunities at their household looms. It is reported that a large number of looms are lying unutilized in Sualkuchi just because of a shortage of weavers.

The organizational actors of the Sualkuchi silk industry are the owners of silk looms and the weavers. In Sualkuchi, the handloom weaving community is totally based on the relationship between owners of looms and the weavers who are occupying different positions with different roles connected to each other in weaving practice. The owners of looms are the entrepreneurial group and the independent weavers who invest their capital in the several stages from production to marketing of the finished products. These stages include buying of raw materials, coloring and preparing yarns, weaving, and marketing of the finished products. The chain starts from the purchase of yarn to delivery of the final products. Production knowledge means how to organize the weaver in one place, make final design and color, allotment of work, distribution of yarn to the weavers and supervision of the whole. Owners have a connection with two types of clients i.e. core and occasional clients. [Shaw et al. \(2015\)](#) in their work reveals that the retail store owners who purchase regularly are considered as core clients and others are irregular or occasional clients. An independent weaver procures raw materials from the market, makes silk and allied products and sells the finished products in the market on his own without any channel. His earnings and profitability depend on market conditions, productivity, managerial skill and so on. They are also exposed to business/market risks.

The hired/paid weavers, on the other hand, are the class of employee who performs the process of weaving and after finishing the product they are paid wages. Hired weavers maybe, working under master weavers or working for cooperatives. The paid weavers are not acquainted with the network of markets directly. [Shaw et al. \(2015\)](#) in their work describes that the weavers possess strong cultural capital (the art of weaving) than other resources. In the Handloom industry, the art (knowledge and skill) of weaving is primary cultural capital rather than the education of the weavers. The authors further say that handloom weaving is always complex work as it is a continuous learning process since childhood like education. The art of weaving cannot be learned efficiently unless born in the family of weavers.

In Sualkuchi there was an evolution of master weavers and the other middlemen who have created a wide gulf between the weaver and the consumer. With the help of middlemen, the independent weavers can sell off their products almost every day through stores which either belong to the middleman or shops to whom the middleman sells. "All the stores of Sualkuchi dealing with handloom fabric purchase products either on cash or credit and sell clothes directly to customers, sell them to stores in different towns and cities of the state. This system has created a backward linkage of the local stores with the loom owners in the village and forward linkage with the storekeepers outside Sualkuchi. The system, however, indicates the emergence of many middlemen between the producer and consumer" ([Baishya, 2005](#)).

Usage of looms based on its purpose

The Handloom Census of India enumerated that there are either working looms or idle looms. Working domestic looms are those looms that are used for non-commercial purposes such as producing fabrics for domestic consumption. Commercial looms are used for an occupational purpose or those looms produce fabrics for market consumption. Both Commercial and domestic looms are those which make fabric for both domestic and market consumption. This type is categorized by the [Third Handloom Census \(2009-10\)](#). [Hani & Das \(2017\)](#) in their work analyzed that the handloom and textile culture is part of traditional belief apart from its importance in the economy. With time commercialization of handloom has taken place and helped weavers earning a livelihood and in popularizing the art. This textile craft has gone some changes like design, its development and also its marketing in modern times.

In a survey conducted in the year 2002 by the census of Sualkuchi, it was found that there were 13752 numbers of active commercial looms.

Table 1: Distribution of weaving units by the purpose of loom usage

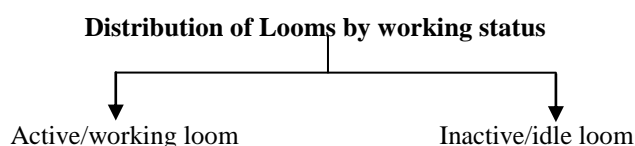
Looms Usage	Respondents (owners of silk looms)	
	Frequency	%
Domestic purpose	0	0
Commercial purpose	32	80
Both commercial and domestic purpose	8	20
Total	40	100

In table 1, it could be seen that products produced in the looms are used both for commercial and domestic purposes. When asked about the purpose of looms usage 80 percent of owners use their products only for commercial purposes and 20 percent use the products both for commercial and sometimes for domestic purposes.

Working Status of looms

All looms enumerated under The Handloom Census-either working or idle- are only types. There would be occasions when some of the looms are dismantled and kept in the storage areas. Such looms have to be checked and assessed to ensure that all the key components are available and not damaged.

A working loom is defined as a complete loom that has been operated at least for one day during the last one year or is at present working. “A complete but idle loom is defined as the loom that has not been used for even a single day during the last one year. If some looms with households remain idle at the time of enumerator’s visit temporarily, such idleness should not be taken into account” ([The Handloom Census of India, 2009-10](#)). This was quite evident during the researcher’s field visit in Sualkuchi. It could be seen that most of the silk looms are lying idle just because of a shortage of weavers and because the traditional looms are replaced using the improved semi-automated fly shuttle looms in the region.



[Schumpeter \(2008\)](#) in his work was the first to identify the human agent as a center of the process of economic development. He considered the entrepreneur as a dynamic agent to change and the catalyst who transforms physical, natural and human resources into corresponding production possibilities. He stated that an entrepreneur is an innovator who introduces a new product, a new production process and finds out a new market, the new source of raw material or introduces a new organization. With the decline of independent weavers and the marginalization of the co-operative sector, it emerges as the dominant system.

“The Government of India has been trying to facilitate the weavers through grants. Under the decentralized plan scheme at the district level grants in the shape of the fly, shuttle looms with accessories at Rs. 7000/- per weaver per set, yarn Rs. 500/- per weaver and Rs 3000 per weaver for maintenance of work shed are provided to poor weavers” ([H&T, 2005-06](#)). The grant for work shed cum housing scheme is also available. This scheme has been operating in Assam since the VII Plan period. The objective of the scheme is to provide dwelling houses and suitable working places to weavers for improving their productivity and earnings. The Deen Dayal Hathkargha Protsahan Yojana scheme has been introduced by the Development Commissioner for Handlooms, Government of India, from the year 2000-01. It provides training to upgrade skills and knowledge of the weaving community and also provides basic inputs for product diversification which will help to access the indigenous as well abroad market. Apart from this, there is a health scheme offering Rs. 500/- per weaver, Rs. 500/- for maternity up to two kids and eye check-ups. 190/- per weaver. Despite providing all these facilities the share of the co-operative sector is not very strong.

As figure 1 shows 50 percent of owners and independent weavers are dependent on middlemen to sell their products in the market. 20 percent of them deal directly with the customers and 10 percent of owners sell the products in their shop. Only 10 percent of the owners have associated with the cooperatives also.

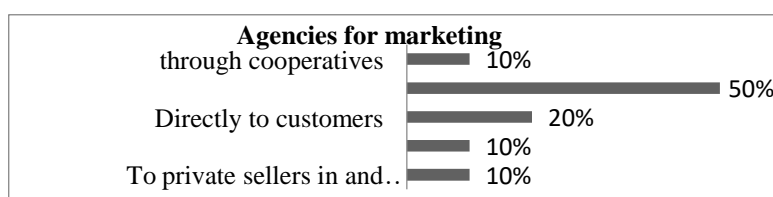


Figure 1: Showing the agencies to sell finished products

Table 2: Source of procurement of raw materials by owners

Source of procurement	Respondents	
	Frequency	%
Yarns from Mysore / Bhagalpur, Gold thread or Guna from Surat (basically raw materials from other states)	7	17.5
Local market/stores/dealers	27	67.5
Direct from Sericultural units in Assam	5	12.5
Outside Country	0	0
Total	40	100

Table 2 shows that 17.5 percent of owners procure mulberry yarns directly from Mysore and gold thread/Guna from Surat. 67.5 percent of the weavers buy the raw materials from the local area itself. Only 12.5 percent of raw materials are bought from some sericulture units in Assam by the owners/weavers directly. To meet the demands of the market, they are forced to procure yarns from outside state.

Marketing facilities

As said by (Oburai and Baker, 2005) “Internationalization is a significant indicator for the growing competitiveness of industries and that international market is complex and tends to vary widely across industries and nations. They further analyzed that Indian textile firms in the early days after liberalization in 1991, could not resist the temptation to access the global markets, however, these decisions were not appropriate as the consumer look for a cohesive set of attributes when they purchase”. “The pre-requisite for the healthy handloom industry is a broad marketing base and appropriate marketing mechanisms. The primary producers have no direct access to either market or market information which results in a mismatch of production and market demand” (Niranjana, 2001). In order to help the sector to grow and bring a sense of professionalism among the weavers and artisans, the creation of facilities for easy and quick marketing of hand-woven products is necessary. This will require value addition in handloom products through design and quality development and arrangement of facilities for easy marketing of hand-woven products. Following steps are important:

- To boost merchandising and marketing of handloom products the Master weavers and Entrepreneurs will be given need-based financial assistance in producing and collecting value-added fabrics in handloom for markets outside the state.
- Marketing of handloom products in Handloom Expos, Melas, etc. both within and outside may be organized by both state and central Government assistance.
- New and innovative schemes for the production of market-oriented products will be encouraged weavers, artisans and entrepreneurs may be financially assisted.
- Joint ventures will also be encouraged with financial assistance both at the domestic and international levels to boost product quality and capturing markets.
- Special market complexes for exclusive sale of handloom products of the state and outside to facilitate buying and selling of varieties of handloom products (Marketing hub/haat) under a single roof.
- Area-specific and special handloom promotion schemes in private as well as in Private-Public Participation (PPP) mode will also be taken up by the department.

Process and Production of handloom weaving

Handlooms are engaged in weaving cotton, silk, and other natural fibers. The process of weaving is the interlacing of two sets of yarn-the weft and the warp. The warp is the lengthwise or longitudinal yarns held stationary in looms and the weft is drawn through and inserted over and under the warp.

A handloom is a loom used to weave fabrics without the use of electricity or power. There are different stages in the process of weaving where several strands of silk yarn come together to become beautiful fabric. Here a discussion is made on the journey into silk weaving process and production.

The overall production of silk fabrics involves some laborious processes before the yarn is put on the loom. “The Indian silk industry is very ancient and mainly cottage based until today, right from cocoon (raw material) production to fabric manufacture. She also said that before the raw silk is woven into the fabric, it must go through a series of operations which condition it for the loom. There are certain series of preliminary preparatory processes involved” (Sonwalkar,

1993). From the cocoon rearing to the production of fabrics the whole process is divided into three parts. The first part includes breeding of silkworms, feeding the larva, spinning the cocoon, heating and softening the cocoon is conducted in Sualkuchi Assam itself by cocoon cultivators. The second part, which includes reeling the filament and packaging the skeins, is conducted in Khanapara, Assam. The last part, which includes forming silk yarn, degumming the yarn and producing silk fabrics, is conducted in Sualkuchi, Assam by handloom weavers. After the yarn is received the first process is dyeing with either chemical dyes or with natural dyestuffs. Then the process goes on from the preparation of warp and weft until the final weaving process.

There are some traditional design patterns and motifs used in handloom products of Assam such as the popular Kingkhap design (design consisting of face to face lions along with a peacock earlier used as designs for dress materials of the aristocrats), butabosa (small petal floral design) and other images of birds, animals, flowers, etc. But today the fashion designers are open to experiment and include motifs and designs keeping in mind the market demands and as per the taste of the new generation. As said by one of the respondents that to survive we have to adapt to the changing trends. Therefore as peoples taste changes, so do the garments made out of Assam silk. From traditional mekhela chadors, the fabric is now fashioned into exquisite sarees, salwar suits, scarves, dresses, shirts and much more. Many customers want to dress materials in Assam silk. Therefore the looms also engage in producing plain pieces or thans or plain sheets upto 10m length which may be stitched as mekhela, shirt, chador, etc.

Fixed Capital and working capital investment

For setting up a weaving center one needs a weaving house or weaving shed and land to build the house. While most of the commercial looms are operated in a separate house, in Sualkuchi we found that weaving is done in the residential houses itself in a separate room. In Sualkuchi the weaving operations are done in sheet roofed buildings or in verandah attached to the residential house or in the courtyard with thatched bamboo sheds. Here, it is difficult to estimate the value of land and buildings. So apart from land and buildings, the fixed capital investment consists of the cost of the handlooms. A hand weaving loom is made of some important parts held together. This includes the frame, beam, reed, healds, shuttle, etc. along with accessories such as wheels, bobbins, spindles and so on. The cost of fly shuttle looms with all its accessories could be estimated at around Rs. 50000.

Besides fixed capital, the weaving centers also need working capital which consists of the raw material prices and also an investment in other aspects such as marketing of products, payment to weavers and so on. The weavers are not able to receive finance from the banks and without proper financial assistance, an industry cannot flourish. Therefore the total working capital of looms depends on the number of looms one owns per unit.

The majority of the looms weave mulberry silk. This shows that there is a growing crisis of muga fabric due to the increased price of muga silk yarns. The majority of the weavers deal with mulberry silk as it is readily available than muga yarn, which is extremely costly at present and they can't even afford to buy raw muga silk yarns.

From the table 3, it is quite clear from the respondents that the fabrics produced in the handlooms are basically for Assamese traditional attires such as Mekhela, chadors, Riha, Gamocha, etc. the various items produced out of silk fabrics are shown below.

Table 3: Items produced by the Respondents

Sl. No.	Fabrics	Items produced
1	Muga silk	Mekhela, chador, Plain fabric in than, stoles, jacket, etc.
2	Mulberry silk	Mekhela chador, Riha, Than fabric, Gamocha, Dhوتي, Challeng chador, etc.
3	Tasar silk	Mekhela, chador, Than, waistcoat, jacket, etc.
4	Cotton	Gamocha etc.
5	Eri, khadi	None

The garment of silk fabric's definition

Mekhela is a lower garment worn by Assamese women from the waist to the ankles. It is like a half saree made in 32" width and 1.75-meter length.

The chador is a long length cloth which is worn by draping around the body and one end tucked in the mekhela. It is worn as half saree pallu made in 42" width and 2.75-meter length.

Riha is part of a three-piece Assamese traditional garment worn with mekhela chador relatively smaller than chador.

Cheleng is a kind of scarf worn by both men and women.

Gamocha or Gamusa is an important symbol in Assamese culture. It is a body wiping cloth. Saree is a women garment that drapes around the body varying from five to nine yards. It is usually in 18-24" width and 1-2 meter length.

Dhoti is an Indian traditional men's garment. Plain than of cloth is plain fabric in 10 meters long.

Saree and Blouse are lady's dress material made in size 48" width and 6.5 to 8-meter length and blouse is of 0.75-0.80 meter length.

Table 4: Source of Design by Paid weavers

Designs	Respondents	
	Frequency	%
Own imagination	10	10
As per instructed by owners/entrepreneurs	44	44
Traditional designs	38	38
Customized orders	8	8
Total	100	100

Most of the handloom products manufactured at Sualkuchi are traditional. Hence apart from having a dependable market in Assam, they could not establish outside the state. Handloom products do get sold outside Assam mostly to Kolkata but this is done by a handful of private sellers and that too mostly through diversified products (cushion covers, towels, curtains).

The handloom products produced by the weavers of Sualkuchi are purely traditional in its design and wearing pattern. Hence the majority of the handloom products are purchased by the Assamese and local people of Assam. As shown in table 4 the design of handloom products of 38 percent weavers was found to be traditional. 10 percent weavers used imagination to design patterns, 8 percent takes customized design orders and 44 percent weave as instructed by the owners. The weavers used either design albums consisting of design cards (made of cardboard), or their own creativity to design patterns for the products. Design cards are bought by the weavers from the local market. The ethnic design of the handloom products holds great traditional value in the Assamese culture. As per the study, the color and design sense varies from weaver to weaver. However, today, designers incorporate patterns and designs based on recent trends.

Cost of yarn and silk fabrics

In 1942 The Fact-Finding Committee had pointed out "So far as yarn is concerned, there is hardly any doubt that the handloom weaver is being mulcted on several fronts by a host of middlemen and parasites, whose existence leads to a pyramiding of the prices of yarn and who have for long carried on nefarious practices regard to the quality as well as the quantity of yarn supplied, and fully exploited the ignorance, poverty, and helplessness of the weavers".

Table 5: Raw silk price at Assam during the year 2015- 2016

Sl No.	Names of yarn	(Amt. In Rs)
1	Muga/Kg	Rs. 14400-Rs. 17200
2	Paat/Kg	Rs. 4500-Rs. 5000
3	Tasar/kg (reeled yarn)	Rs. 3200-Rs. 4000
4	Eri/Kg (spun silk yarn)	Rs. 2150-Rs. 2400

Source: Central silk Board as on 15.09.2017

Table 6: Rise in yarn prices in 1999-2000, 2006-07 and 2016-17 (in Rs/kg)

Name of yarns	1999-2000	2006-07	2016-17
Muga	1500-2000	4500	14400- 17200
Mulberry	900-1000	3000	4500- 5000
Tasar	N/A	N/A	3200- 4000
Eri	1200	2000	2150- 2400

Source: Central Silk Board Silk Bulletin

As shown in table 5 and table 6, the prices of each Kg of Mulberry and Muga silk yarn, for instance, has gone up to Rs 4500 and Rs 14400 from Rs 900 to 2000 in 2017 and weavers are forced to pay this money, just because they have no alternative choice. Thus, within 10 years, the price per kilogram of yarn has increased to more than Rs 10000. The

unusual sudden price rise in yarn brings untold misery to the industry in the area as production is against advance orders at a predetermined price. In the entire process, it is the weaver's earning which ultimately gets squeezed. It has already been mentioned that production of Muga has not increased proportionately with the rise in demand for it; rather it is on the decline, on the one hand, due to the felling of Muga worm feeding trees (Som and Soalu) for the purpose of getting more cultivable land and the other to the hard labor and great weather risk involved in rearing it.

PRODUCT DIVERSIFICATION, MARKETING OUTLETS FOR THE PRODUCTS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF SUALKUCHI WEAVING INDUSTRY

In order to cope with the present market, it is important for the products to be more appealing as per the demand of the market. There is a need to innovate designs to capture the global market. Following are the measures as suggested by the *Regional Silk Technological Research Station (RSTRS) under the Central Silk Board (CSB)*, Assam:

- Common Facility Centre or CFCS for weaving preparatory machines such as winding, double-twisting, and mechanized warping may be established to be operated on a nominal charge basis.
- Jacquards of higher capacities with pneumatic lifting mechanisms may be provided to existing innovative designers.
- CFCS for embroidery machines can be established so that Muga/Mulberry/Tasar plain silk woven on power looms can be embroidered for value addition and better marketability.
- CFCS for dyeing/fabric processing can be established the services of which can be offered at nominal charges at no profit/no less basis. Many small weavers can avail of this facility such that exploitation from yarn traders can be minimized.
- Design studios with innovative professional designers may be provided for diversification of designs.
- Brands may be popularized such as “Sual-Muga Gold”, “Sual-Silk Shirting”, “Sual-Tasar”, “Sual-Queen”, “Sual-Mekhela”, “Sual-Chadar”, “Sual-Churidar”, “Sual-Curtains” etc. to create a name for Sualkuchi both in domestic and overseas markets. Fashion shows and advertisements will be of great help to popularize the brands.
- The weavers should be provided training in export-import policies in order to prepare them as exporters and importers of silk products. This practice will help them get rid of the grip of middlemen.
- Training in all spheres of activity be it technical or management or administrative aspects be given to the targeted stakeholder.

As the handloom industry of Sualkuchi is not thoroughly organized and hence marketing agencies are also diverse. The weavers who are registered under the weaver's co-operative societies manufacture and market rather than sell the products through the societies. But the independent or the unorganized weavers sell their products directly to customers or through marketing agencies commonly known as middlemen or brokers. The unorganized weavers need to depend a lot on these middlemen because they do not get direct buyers daily. But if a weaver has manufactured the fabric he needs to sell it not only to meet the requirements of daily household consumption but also to procure necessary raw materials to keep his works going on. Hence he is compelled to maintain a connection with the middlemen. “Even a small time-lag between production and marketing/selling hurts the weavers' financial condition” (Venkatraman, 1975). The middlemen purchase the clothes from the weavers in cash. The independent weaver cannot afford much time going directly to different places or shops as he has to devote time during the manufacturing process also. So a congenial relationship needs to be built between weavers and middlemen whereby the middlemen will come to the weaver to buy the products.

Baishya (2005) in his work on Sualkuchi found that sometimes a situation arises that they need to sell even below the cost of production, which does not cover the wages spent on producing the fabric. The selling of products under such a situation is termed as distress selling. This distress sale keeps the poor weavers poor and this is a vicious circle for them. Hence the export market of Sualkuchi handloom products to other states and abroad is negligible. “The annual textile requirement in the state for the year 2006-2007 was 400 million sq. mtrs. The handloom sector was annually producing about 160 million sq. mtrs of fabric for consumption. The gap was met through fabrics from other states” (Handloom & Textile Annual Report, 2006-07). This shows that handloom producers of Assam have ample scope for growth in the local home market if optimum utilization of opportunity is made. Healthy competition in the market is always welcomed and desirable but alongside the practice of selling spurious products is also creating a problem. Many sellers short-change customers by selling Tasar products as Muga Silk and fine synthetic fabrics as Mulberry Silk. These dubious products are slowly increasing in the market. Hence 'Silk Mark' and 'Handloom Mark' labels should be emphasized upon.

ISSUES FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE INDUSTRY

Baishya (1998) in his article explained the problems faced by weavers in manufacturing silk fabrics and emphasized the efforts to change people's attitudes towards the adoption of intermediate technologies. He said that the use of intermediate technology will benefit the silk industry in the future. At present times there is a need to

produce more innovative designs and products to capture the new market. Most of the products in Assam are mainly produced for the domestic market. Assam is not capable enough to export products to other states and also to other countries. For value addition and higher profitability, there is a need to switch over from traditional products to new products which are more appealing to capture new markets. At present only a small proportion of products are marketed outside the state and also in the overseas market.

As per the reports of the Government Offices, certain important measures have to be taken to develop and uplift the dying silk weaving industry of Sualkuchi. These measures are to be taken keeping in view the aspects of product diversification, better marketability and higher profitability, such as:

The most important measure would be the establishment of 'yarn banks' of muga and mulberry silks. These silk yarns should be made available to the weavers at reasonable market prices. Raw materials should be made available to all the weavers without partiality.

Various training programs and other support should be provided to the weavers to enhance their weaving skills along with improved handloom with advanced mechanism should be established.

Certain welfare schemes with health and maternity benefits to weavers should be provided for motivating them to work.

Market facilities are a very important factor for any commercially weaving industry. Participation in various expos and *haats* should be made possible.

The government of Assam should look into the matter of idle, inactive looms and sick units. The various schemes and programs formulated by the government to provide weavers with requirements are not seen practically implemented.

As a measure of safeguard to the handloom sector from the onslaught of power looms and to protect the interest of millions of weavers and artisans involved in the trade, Government intervention has become essential to curb the illegal activities of traders who indulge in flooding the market with cheap fabrics made in power looms which are otherwise prevented from manufacturing in power looms under the implementation of Hank Yarn Obligation Order and Reservation Orders issued under the Handloom (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act 1985. The Govt. will monitor enforcement of the provision and strict action will be taken against the person found violating the same ([Advantage Assam, Handloom Policy](#)).

There is a need for a brand name for Sualkuchi products. Of late Sualkuchi manufactured products is however been granted its brand name as "*SUALKUCHI'S*". The Ministry of Textiles has also organized an official mark for silk fabrics which is the 'Silk Mark' to differentiate pure from fake products.

The Kamrup district administration has set up an 'Indian Fashion Institute' at Sualkuchi intending to generate more entrepreneurs for the future and to create a brand of 'Sualkuchi silk' in collaboration with the NE council and the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Kolkata. The institute had begun its function from August 2008 to Sualkuchi. The institute is imparting a training program on fashion and textile designing. The institution is equipped with various facilities with the latest machinery and modern facilities. It has an updated library and resource to provide updated information on color, motifs, fashion trends, and industrial strategies. The training program shall facilitate practical strategic and operational understanding of design development skills.

CONCLUSION

From the present study, it is concluded that the silk weaving Industry holds out a lot of prospects in Assam. Weavers migrate to Sualkuchi from other places, and engage themselves in weaving, against wages. A large number of educated and uneducated youths can get opportunities to engage themselves in this industry. The weaving industry can be considered one of the best to engage in native place, which gives the unemployed avenues for self-employment and wage employment. There are many examples of formerly paid weavers emerging now as master weavers. The number of weavers engaged in weaving at looms in Sualkuchi proves the importance of traditional handlooms in rural areas. A large number of looms in Sualkuchi are lying unutilized just because of a shortage of weavers. As the handloom industry of Sualkuchi is not thoroughly organized and because of this the marketing agencies are also diverse, the majority of the weavers rely on middlemen to sell their finished products. A sense of professionalism among the weavers and artisans, creation of facilities for easy and quick marketing of hand-woven products is necessary. The unusual sudden price rise in yarn brings untold misery to the industry in the area as production is against advance orders at a predetermined price. There is a need to innovate designs to capture the global market. There is an urgent need to overcome these problems. Sualkuchi weavers have made a distinct place in India. However, there is a need for skill up-gradation of weavers to create new and improved designs for the market. Besides these, we also mark some prospects like the growth of sales and market share, increasing demand, provides employment opportunity and so on. So it is very important to take effective measures to help this industry bloom again and help in the economic development of the state. This sector has not attained proper awareness as far as weaving related challenges are concerned.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Certain shortcomings placed restrictions on the research work. Firstly, the silk industry in Sualkuchi is mainly cottage based and small scale where the people engaged in silk handloom weaving culture do not maintain proper records of production and sale of finished products of silk. It was found that the owners hesitate to disclose facts and figures of production and income. They tend to show less production and income for fear of sales tax and income tax etc. The weavers are found to be unwilling to divulge some basic information relating to grants received from Government agencies and tend to exaggerate their poor condition. The Government agencies and departments are also not equipped with up-to-date information and data about the handloom industry in general and the Sualkuchi silk industry in particular. Due to the busy schedule of the officials to reply to the questions asked in the interview schedule the researcher had to face some problems as we failed to get the statistical data of the Sualkuchi industry regarding different aspects.

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