CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Problem under Study

The art of weaving is one of the oldest craft practiced by humankind. Assam is known for its beautiful handloom products. It enjoys an important position in respect of its contribution to the sericulture and weaving in India. The silk industry of Assam mainly comprises the culture of *endi* (thread extracted from *Philosamia ricini*), *malberi* (thread of *Bombyx mori*) and *muga* (thread of *Antheraea assamia*). Of these three varieties, *endi* and *muga* are indigenous to the state of Assam. The *endi* or *eri* is the produce of the polyvoltine worm known as *Philosamia ricini* which feeds on the leaves of the castor plants. The *endi* or *eri* worm derives its name from the castor (*Ricinicus communis L.*) plant locally known as *ara* in Assam and which constitutes its principal food.

Sericulture has been regarded as ‘the industry of the poor’, and it plays a significant role in transferring wealth from the rich class to the poor section of the society. Silk is mostly consumed by the affluent class and the value is distributed among the farmers, spinners, reebers, weavers, and traders. It has been the policy of the Government of India to give due importance to the rural sector with focus on
employment intensive strategy of development in which next to agriculture, the small scale industries and handicrafts play a significant role. It has laid emphasis on matters that are vital for the revival of rural crafts and thereby for the rejuvenation of the economy of the region particularly the villages. Handloom is in fact the symbol of the largest and oldest cottage industry of Assam. Assam ranks fifth among the silk producing states of India, producing 5 per cent of the world's raw silk. India produces 60 per cent of the total endi silk in the world. More than 90 per cent of the endi production in India comes from Assam. Handloom weaving is one of the most important cottage industries of the state. According to the Statistical Handbook of Assam the number of sericulture villages in the state are 9663 (2005-6) and the total number of families engaged in sericulture activities is 195152. According to 2001-2002 census (Provisional Census), a total number of 125420 families are engaged in endi culture activities. Around 70 per cent of the total families involved in sericulture activities are engaged in endi culture, among which 4484 families are from the district of Kamrup.

Women are recently beginning to be viewed as important contributors to the wealth of a nation. The study of the role of women in the economic sphere of the society has become an important subject today. Academicians from different disciplines as well as policy makers and planners have all felt the relevance of the issue of women's involvement in the economy. According to the 2001 census, women constitute 48 per cent of the total population of the country. Thirty two per cent of women are engaged in economic activities. In Assam the total women workers are 20.8 per cent, of which 9.7 per cent are categorized as main workers.
and 11.1 per cent are marginal workers. The total percentage of women workers for rural areas in Assam is 22.28 per cent, of which 7.94 per cent are engaged in household industries. Of the different household industries, handloom and weaving forms an important sector. Spinning and weaving is a wide spread economic activity in Assam transcending caste and economic borders. It is an intrinsic part of the culture of this region and a home without a loom, a few years back was unthinkable. A girl having dexterity in weaving is held in high esteem in society. It is exclusively a women centric craft and is signified by the term *sipini*, which denotes a female weaver and there is no local equivalent of this term for male weaver. At present there are instances of male weavers in Assam who practice this craft more on an economic basis. Handloom weaving is a traditional industry of the state and is considered to be the largest home industry next only to agriculture. The women of Assam are accustomed to spinning and weaving. Unlike other states of the country, women from both the hill and plain region of Assam, irrespective of their caste, creed, and status, practice weaving and they feel proud of using their homemade fabrics. The tradition is still very popular in spite of the influx of different varieties of machine made cloth available in the market. *Endi* as one of the premier cottage industries is closely associated with the culture and habits of the Assamese people. The fibre spun from *endi* cocoon is called the silk of the poor. It has several characteristics, such as graceful gloss, high stainability and durability. It can be blended with cotton and ramie fibre. It has a rough appearance and touch. Textile woven with this silk are also characterized by strength, durability and warmth. Handloom weaving is an important economic activity of the women who perform this work in the course of their daily domestic chores. Besides meeting the household
demand on clothing, this activity is also playing a vital role in the economy of the state. It is providing employment to a large section of the population. The industry is primarily dependent on the labour of women. *Eri* rearing, spinning and weaving are mostly done by the womenfolk. The study seeks to focus on women and the *endi* industry. The findings of the present study will add to the existing knowledge about the *endi* industry and the women engaged in this economic activity.

The weavers of Rampur village are the focus of the study for obvious reasons. Rampur is the largest and major *endi* producing area of the state as a whole. Almost all the households of this region have taken this activity as one of the sources of income. It is one of the oldest and major *endi* producing centres of the state and the country. It is estimated that of the total production of *endi* silk in Assam almost 90 per cent of the *endi* silk come from Rampur.

**Objectives of the present Study**

The research work was confined to the study of *endi* production in the villages with an emphasis on the role and participation of women in this activity. The objectives of the study were to assess the socio-economic status of the women practicing the craft. The study is an attempt,

(a) to understand what makes women remain behind in a traditional occupation like spinning and weaving in a fast changing environment;

(b) to find out as to how the women combine their weaving activities with other household chores;
(c) to evaluate the pattern of assistance received by the weaver in the performance of her work;
(d) to find the impinging factors in weaving in the study area;
(e) to locate the difficulties and the changes;
(f) to study women’s contribution to the total household earning;
(g) to find the nature and extent of women’s role in decision making in matters related to family and other issues; and;
(h) to assess the weavers knowledge about different schemes and programme and their participation in the same.

Review of Literature

Studies conducted on various aspects of endi silk are few and far between. But examples of reference of silk and handloom weaving that flourished in Assam in the past are found in many literary and foreign accounts. Assam produces fine and exquisite handloom products which has earned universal acclamation and this is evident from many literary and historical records. Writings in the Arthasashtra and Harshacharita, inferred that in the art of rearing silk worm and the weaving of the best kind of silk clothes, the weavers of ancient Assam had earned reputation equal to that of the Chinese (Choudhury, 1959:364-368). The Greek travelers like Pliny and the anonymous author of Periplus referred to silk of Assam in their travelogues (cited in Acharya, 1985:1-2). Dionysius refers to the tasar silk of Assam. (Choudhury, 1959:358-364).
The Ahom age is regarded as a golden age during which spinning and weaving flourished in Assam. There are several writers whose studies on the socio-economic life during the Ahom period made several references to the silk of Assam. (Dasgupta, 1982:188, Gogoi, 1991: 219). Several foreign writers like Gait, Hamilton, Hunter and Wade have also made reference to the importance the Ahoms gave on silk. Travernier remarked on the silk of Assam (cited in Rajguru, 1988:294). Writings on medieval Assam throwing light on the apparel and economy of the period is to be found in many writings. (Barpujari, 1993:57-58, Saikia, 2000:67-80).

The silk industry was also highly patronized in the neighbouring Koch kingdom. References are to be found in the writing of Nath (1989:139,149). The British administrators in the course of their rule in Assam have left detailed accounts of the land, flora, fauna, geography, history, and culture of the people of Assam (Cosh, 1975:31). Regarding the description of the endi worm, and the botanical aspects of its rearing, there are several references. Martin and Robinson mentioned about silk of Assam, and Allen (cited in Census of India 1961.) too wrote accounts about the endi worm. The British writers have left ethnographic accounts of the tribes and communities of northeast India. References to the use of endi in their material culture also find a place, (Dalton, 1978:32, Endle, 1995: 19-22). Indigenous writings also throws ample light on the subject of apparels of the people of the region (Bagchi, 1983:12-22, Kumar, 1983:34-40, Nair, 1985:83, Vidyarthi, 1986:97, Bora, 1993:13, Medhi, 1994:130, Nunisa, 1993:82, Kakati, 2006:18-19). With regard to trade in silk in Assam between Assam and the Mughals, the book Fatiyah-i-Ibriah
mentions that people were very skillful in weaving embroidered silk (cited in Das Gupta, 1982:189)

*Endi* has been an important commodity of trade among tribals and non tribals since ancient time. References of it is found in the writings of earlier as well as contemporary writers (Robinson, 1975:347, Martin, 1976:661-662, Mackenzie, 1979:18, Rajguru, 1988:359, Gogoi, 1991:219, Dhar, 1996:12-15, Dhar, 2005:43). The decline in spinning and weaving has also been a subject of much concern and has been referred in the writings of Barman, 1933 (cited in Chakraborty, 1999: 30-37) and (Ganguly, 1968:40). Writings in the Monographs of the Silk Cloths of Assam, tell about the effort by various individuals since early time to give a commercial flavor to *endi* production (cited in Saikia, 2000:68).

There has been attempt to make *endi* a fashionable fabric by giving it a contemporary look. (*The Assam Tribune*, 17th October, 2005). Pioneering work in the field of handloom are the works of (Sarkar, 1980, Choudhury, 1981a,1982b). Their books have attempted to give the readers an understanding of the *endi* and *muga* worm both as a biological entity and for its commercial viability.

An important report on *endi* is *The Handicraft Survey Report: Endi Silk Industry of Assam* conducted by the Census of India (1981). This report is limited to various aspects of *Endi* Silk Industry in three selected village in Rampur area in the southern bank of the Brahmaputra river in the Kamrup district of Assam. The study has focused attention on the rural based craft, touching upon those aspects like the
commodity produced, techniques employed for manufacturing, raw material used, their availability, methods adopted for the sale of finished products, etc. It has laid emphasis on matters that are vital for the revival of rural crafts and thereby for the rejuvenation of the economy of the region particularly the villages. In this study, an attempt was made to study the various aspects of the craft as revealed by field survey. The Department of Sericulture and Weaving, Government of Assam (1980) had conducted a survey during 1975-76 in 598 Gaon Panchayats of the plain districts of Assam to assess the position of the silk industry in terms of production and employment. The Survey Report revealed that the majority of the population pursuing the silk culture as a leisure time occupation. It also found out that the silk culture in Assam belong to both the general and scheduled castes.

The book *Loom of Interdependence- Silk weaving Cooperatives in Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu state of India* (Artherburn, 1982) is a case study of what makes cooperatives successful. The everyday life of silk handloom weavers in the neighbourhoods and homes of Kanchipuram is taken as a background of the study. This study has been regarded as making an important contribution to the Sociology of Development and the New Urban Anthropology. The author make uses of anthropological method and theory to build her analysis. Another important work was on the economics of silk production in Assam. This study was concentrated in Sibsagarh district of Assam and the objectives of the study were to assess the economics of silk production in Assam and its production and marketing problems. (Dutta, 1983).
In the book, *Development of Handloom Industry*, Das, (1986) covers the entire field of the handloom sector of Assam. The origin and development of the industry, its contribution to the state economy, the role of the cooperative sector, the non-cooperative sector, production—both inputs and outputs, marketing and finance are elaborately dealt in the book. The book entitled *Changing Trends in Women’s Employment* (Savara, 1986), examines how working women in the textile industry experience themselves. Goswami’s, (1988) book *Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs* devotes a complete chapter to weaving and spinning and describes the relationship existing between weaving and women. Referring to the female work participation rate in the handloom industry, the writer, Sharma, (1996:186) opined that an idea about the condition of the rural workers in general can be had by looking into the conditions of the women workers of the handloom industry.

Another important study was on the *Women Weavers of Sualkuchi: The Silk town of Assam*, and was conducted by the Omio Kumar Das Institute of Social change and Development (2000). The study looked at work related to weaving, living and working condition of the women weavers, migration of weavers to Sualkuchi, workload, working days, rate of return received by them, technology used, job security, labour market security, job satisfaction, relations between employee and employer, contribution to family income, etc. The book on *The silk industry of Assam: A case study of the Sualkuchi Cluster* (Baishya, 2005) contains significant data about the silk industry in Sualkuchi. This book deals on the development of sericulture in Assam, analyses the actual position of the silk industry in Sualkuchi, its
investment pattern, employment and income generation, marketing, and enumerates
the various problems faced by loom owners of the silk industry.

There has been an attempt by scholars to have a detailed study on silk and their
different aspects. Ph.D studies on subjects related to the silk of Assam are to be
found in Universities across the country. (Dutta, 1983, Dookia, 1984, Baishya, 1986,
*Indian Journal of Sericulture*, *Indian Silk*, *Silk India*, *The District Gazetteers*, *The
Census Reports* and *Handicraft Survey Reports* by the Directorate of Census as well
as literatures from the Central Silk Board, Department of Handloom and Textiles,
and Department of Sericulture have from time to time furnished details and statistics
on the silk industry of the country.

Certain articles like 'Women and Economic Development- A brief Study upon
Handloom Weaving in Assam' (Das, 1994) tells us about the role of handloom
weaving to generate employment and its contribution to the rural family income.
Another article- 'Muga Culture in N. E Economy'(Rahman, 2004) describes it as an
employment intensive occupation of low investment, especially for people in rural
and semi-urban areas and high output source generating substantial income.
Several papers presented in the Seminar on Strategies for Development of
Sericulture in Assam (1999) and organized by the Assam *Krishi aru Gramodyog
Prashikhan Vidyalaya*, Khanapara, Guwahati Agricultural and Regional Science
Centre, focuses on different aspects of the silk of Assam. The paper on 'Ericulture as
a Remedy of Rural Poverty in Assam : A Micro level Study in Barpeta District' (De-
and Das, 2007), tries to throw some light on the role of ericulture and endi-
entrepreneurship in the generation of income, employment and removal of poverty in Assam.

The foregoing review of literature on weaving makes it clear that although there are several studies which have been conducted on silk from different angles, yet there are only a few studies focusing on the craft from an anthropological perspective.

Methodology

(a) Sources of information:

The information for the study was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included collection of data from the study area. Secondary sources of information included official statistics on weaving and spinning, local newspaper accounts, census publications, etc. The internet was also used to gather information on silk related issues. Another source of information was gathered from persons who had knowledge and insight on issues related to the study. The library has been a source of knowledge, both practical and theoretical which guided in the accumulation of important data. Publications in books and Journals aided greatly in the study. Data was also sourced from a variety of unpublished documents.
(b) Study Area

Rampur is a very big area and the Rampur Gaon Panchayat has ten number of villages under it. Bhagabatipara and Bhurapara, two villages from the Rampur Gaon Panchayat were selected for conducting the study. Demographic data on the following variables like age, sex, literacy level, marital status, availability of basic household amenities, ownership of house, land, looms and other items, etc were collected from 490 number of households which formed the total number of houses in the villages during the period of survey. The data was collected over a period of three years in several phases. Since the area of study was situated around 40 kms. from the city of Guwahati, the researcher commuted daily for the period of study. The households from the villages were identified with the help of panchayat members and also weavers from a Weaving Society.

(c) Sampling Procedure

Sampling was done in two stages. In the first stage, data was collected from all the housing units in the village with no prior information about who lives there. In the initial contacts the respondents were informed about the nature of the study and were given some indications as to the type of information they might have to provide. In the second stage, two hundred houses were randomly selected from among the total households.

(d) Sample of the Study

After collection of demographic data from 490 households it was found that 425 households are associated with spinning and weaving activities. From among
the 425 households a sample of two hundred households were selected randomly for collection of detailed data on issues related to spinning and weaving. Since the study was conducted on weavers, hence it was desirable to choose women among those associated with weaving and spinning. They were the one who knew the most about the craft. Detailed household data and case studies were conducted on weavers from these households. These two hundred weavers were interviewed intensively to have an in-depth understanding of the weavers and their association with endi culture.

(e) Research Tools and Techniques

(i) Village Data Schedule

A Village Data Schedule was applied to have a detailed understanding of the village and its surrounding, the availability of infrastructures and facilities. The data for the village schedule was sought from different individuals to minimize discrepancy.

(ii) Household Data Schedule

For collection of household data a Household Data Schedule was applied for each household of the villages. Both the village and household schedules contained some questions or blank tables. It thus had two types of questions, firstly those that are in the form of direct questions and secondly those that are in the form of a table.
(iii) Interview Schedule

An Interview Schedule containing both qualitative and quantitative queries was applied for eliciting information from each of the two hundred households. This data was collected by interviewing the weaver's family members using the interview schedule. The schedule had two parts – the first part sought information on household characteristics, means of livelihood, earnings, savings, indebtedness, division of labour in the household. The second part of the schedule focused on weavers seeking information about their background, such as age, marital status, education, income, participation in the various spinning and weaving related activities, knowledge about schemes and programme. Information was also sought on health, membership to different organizations, exposure to mass media, decision making pattern and their opinion and attitudes regarding certain issues related to children's education and domestic violence. The questions were both close end and open end types. In the close end types the respondents were offered a set of answers from which they were asked to choose and in the case of open end questions, they were encouraged to express their responses in a free and spontaneous manner.

(iv) Observation Method

This method was applied in the field to garner data on different aspects of the study. Detailed field notes were taken which were transcribed as soon as possible after observing a certain situation.
(v) Interview Guide

The interview guide contained the topics or broad headings about many queries which were to be asked to respondents.

(vi) Case Study

Case studies from respondents on varied aspects of the study were conducted. These case studies aided in eliciting information on many pertinent issues related to weaving and spinning. The case studies captured the respondents' views of their own experiences in their own words.

(vii) Focus Group Discussion

Focus Group Discussion was also conducted for getting information. For the study, the researcher had discussion on particular topics with 8-10 respondents together. Altogether 5 Focus Group Discussions took place with weavers. These made possible to get varied views and opinions in each group on similar topics.

(f) Difficulties Faced in Data Collection

One of the problems faced in the field was that the weavers had a multitude of work, so in the midst of an interview, a weaver would get up to do one chore or the other. As a result, often, a person had to be visited a number of times to complete one interview as she was unable to spare enough time in one sitting. The second problem was related to income and expenditures of the household. Since most of them do not have a fixed and regular income and did not keep record of their expenditure they were not able to give accurate data on these aspects.
The villagers wanted to know how the researcher's use of the data would help the weavers. They were convinced that it would be useful not only for the researcher but also for the planners and administrators who are concerned with the welfare programme of the weavers. Hence they insisted that the researcher should use her influence in helping the weavers to receive some kinds of benefits from the administration.

(g) Data Processing and Analysis

After the data was collected, it was necessary to arrange the material in some kind of concise and logical order. The responses in the schedules were coded and tabulated. The data was further analyzed using simple statistical tool.

(h) Presentation of the Data

The study has been presented in seven chapters. Chapter I give an introduction of the topic of study, the problem and the statement, objectives, review of literature, the methods used and the limitations of the study. Chapter II presents the ethnographic scenario which includes a brief profile of the district of Kamrup and demographic and other socio-economic details about the study area. Chapter III is based on secondary data and is an appraisal to endi culture in Assam. It focuses on the botanical and historical aspects of endi, its importance in the culture of this region, and tools and implements used in the manufacture of endi clothes. Chapter IV is devoted to the endi culture in the study area. It gives a picture of the households integral to endi culture, type of work associated with spinning and
weaving, manufacturing process, type of raw material used, tools and equipments required for the craft, type of products woven, type of weavers, traditional knowledge, beliefs and taboos, role of man and changing scenario in weaving. Chapter V is a detailed study on two hundred households of weavers and gives a picture of the socio-economic condition of the households and also details of the weavers association with the craft. Chapter VI gives a brief idea of the committees and marketing associated with spinning and weaving in the study area, trade in endi, present status of the silk, role played by Government and Non Government organizations including role of self help groups and cooperatives. It looks into cost of production and margins of profit, place of sale of the finished products, government schemes and programme and advantages and disadvantages faced by the weavers in using government supplied yarns and equipments. Chapter VII is the final chapter and gives the overall summary of the study, and also suggests recommendations for the up-liftment of the weavers and development of this craft. Maps, statistical tables, photographs have also been incorporated in the study wherever found necessary.

(i) Limitations of the Study

The study is limited in the sense that it examines in depth the weavers in the villages of Bhagabatipara and Bhurapara of Rampur only. So it does not include the weavers of other places around Rampur. Sericulture involves rearing, spinning, weaving, and is a big industry covering a gamut of characteristics. This study covers only a part of the whole, and do not claim to study the diverse range of subjects under this field.