Chapter VIII

PROSPECT OF HANDLOOM INDUSTRY

Introduction

Handloom weaving in Assam and more particularly in Goalpara district is still being carried on as a non-commercial proposition and employment provided by this sector is generally of part-time nature. This apart the very approach of the Bodo people in the Goalpara district to this important sector is casual inasmuch as they have taken it as a part-time or leisure-time vocation. Primarily, producing clothes for their family requirements. This should not lead us to assume that the prospect of the handloom weaving is bleak. As a matter of fact, the prospect is very bright provided appropriate steps are taken for its all-round development. It is encouraging to note that the Bodo people also recognise the economic importance of this household industry.

Handloom weaving is a manual process and production of handloom textiles are treated as a family pastime by the Bodo people. Not to speak of Bodo people alone, the non-commercial approach afflicts the handloom industry of the entire State. This perhaps indicates why handloom weaving in our State has remained at the subsistence-level in spite of its prospect for expansion and development. The
situation may be definitely improved provided efforts are made to modernise the industry by making available all pre­loom and post-loom facilities including the marketing of the finished products. Otherwise, the potentiality of the industry will remain underutilised.

Prospect of development

It is well-recognised that handloom weaving occupies an unique and important place in the socio-economic life of the State. For the Bodo people also, handloom weaving has become an integral part of their tradition and has an important bearing to their economic life. However, the prospects of handloom weaving of the Bodo people has not yet been properly recognised because of certain drawbacks like non-commercial and casual approach of the people. There is no denying the fact that the handloom textiles produced by the Bodo people bears a stamp of quality.

Bodo weavers, as a class, are very efficient in weaving and they produce both cotton and silk fabrics specially endi. The handwoven clothes of Bodo weavers bear certain characteristics. First, the Bodo weavers are mostly engaged in production of traditional dresses suitable for uses of their own group of people which limits their marketing prospects. But, if their products can be
diversified suitably for uses by the other people with certain modifications, it will directly find a better marketing prospect both internally and externally. Secondly, the Bodo weavers produce their clothes with outdated processes and practices. The industry needs modern outlook to increase its rate of production with regular and adequate supply of raw materials and finance, to make the industry thrive and prosper. It is significant to note that a Yarn Bank was opened in Guwahati during 1984 along with dyeing provisions. This will ease the problem of yarn supply and dyed yarns in the State.

The expansion and development of handloom textiles be assessed in the context of internal requirements as well as its potentiality of export market. The prospect of the industry be viewed in the light of these twin objectives and steps taken to implement them so as to attain the stage of perfection and prosperity.

Handloom weaving may be used as a powerful tool for socio-economic development of the Bodo people living in the rural areas. This should be viewed in the context of social recognition of weaving in the Bodo society. This again speaks why there is total involvement of the Bodo women-folk in handloom weaving. This attachment to the industry can easily be switched over to professional involvement provided the weavers are made aware of its brighter prospects.
Handloom weaving has a bright future provided the Bodo weavers are economically motivated to undertake weaving as an income generating trade. Its prosperity will be assured if steps are taken in the right direction. Some of the steps may be broadly summed up as follows:

**Systematic Planning of production**

Maximum production at minimum cost or maximum output with minimum inputs have been accepted as the important criterion of successful industrial operation. Production is a process of conversion of raw materials into consumable form of finished products. Systematic planning of production is, therefore, related with its effective organisation, control and regulation of the various activities associated with the process of production. Attainment of maximum productivity is possible only when available resources are effectively utilised in a harmonious working atmosphere.

A systematic planning for production of handloom clothes may be regarded as a vital factor for the growth and success of the industry. Because, a planned production process presupposes a harmonious chain of collection of raw materials, tools and implements till the stage of finished products. Any dislocation in the chain will disturb the entire process. Further, a result-oriented production of
handloom textiles presupposes the establishment of proper worksheet equipped with improved looms and accessories. Systematic and planned production process requires the procurement of required raw materials in appropriate quality and quantity at the right time to ensure a steady flow of production.

**Introduction of modern technology**

The handloom industry is an industry which primarily depend on manual labour and skill of the weavers. This not only results in lower rate of production but at the same time makes the product costlier. But, in this age of rapid technological advances, the handloom weaving should be discouraged from continuing their production in the traditional way. The industry must be equipped with modern devices to face the challenge of time. Because, the introduction of modern and scientific looms would solve the problem of high cost of production whereas, the low fine quality, poor speed, old patterns and designs leading to stiff competition with that of mill-made cloth in the market. To improve the quality and economic performance to produce marketable quality of handloom products it is more appropriate to go for modernisation. In this connection it may be pointed out that the making of cloth of modernisation of handlooms is not a fashion of the day but it is crucial
to survive in the market and to protect from market doldrums. The process of modernisation however, does not necessarily mean automation, but it is a replacement of the age-old and out-moded methods by improved one. Since the improvements and automation are taking place so constantly in the mills the handloom industry too should adjust itself with improved process of production. As the term modernisation includes rationalisation of structure, replacement traditional looms by improved types of looms such as frame looms, looms fitted with dobby, jacquards, semi-automatic looms, replacement of bamboo reeds with iron or brass reeds and other related equipments and accessories.

It is, however, disheartening to observe that the Bodo people are yet to recognise the impact of improved technology for quality products. The Bodo weavers of Goalpara district generally use the fly-shuttle loom. An estimated 92 per cent of the Bodo weavers in the district use the fly-shuttle looms and rest of the weavers uses the throw-shuttle looms. But, it should be noted in this connection that they are not interested in the use of new devices because of the fact that they do not have the requisite technical knowledge to operate the new methods. It is, therefore, necessary to change the traditional method of weaving of the Bodo people to modernity. Because, the modernisation of handloom weaving of the Bodo people can be
effected by using modern methods and appliances since the beginning of pre-loom processes up to its post-loom stage. As for instance, the using of warping drums, improved Charkha, semi-automatic looms with improved appliances combining with the quality products and designs modification may be considered in the interest of the future growth of the industry.

In order to increase the productivity of handlooms, the modernisation of the industry has a special significance. In this connection, Government patronisation to weavers cooperatives must be considered with greater emphasis. Financial assistance from the Government to the weavers cooperatives in shape of grants and subsidy or loan to purchase improved appliances are also not at all adequate. Similarly, the role of the Weavers Extension Service centres for providing extension services to the weavers should be geared up. In backward districts like Goalpara, these centres should be the nucleus for development of the handloom weavers. These centres may undertake the work of supplying necessary yarns to the weavers and creating of marketing facilities for the finished products besides providing technical guidance as well as assuring the weavers a steady wage-rate.

As the Bodo weavers persist with the traditional pattern of weaving, production suffers from the quality and
quantity. This necessitates the imparting of proper technical know-how to the Bodo weavers so that it may help to modernise their production and to produce quality products keeping in view the market demand. Over and above, it is necessary to diversify the production process to suit the needs of the customers with a market-oriented approach.

Similarly, the endi production of Bodo weavers has a better scope for development by improving the present process of production which has been practised in a crude form and in a very limited scale. It is really surprising that the Bodo weavers continue to depend upon their traditional practices despite the tremendous break-through in textile industry in rest of the country.

Commercialisation of production

Most of the Bodo weavers produce only to meet their own clothing requirements. It is estimated from my field survey that 80.22 per cent of the Bodo weavers practise weaving as a non-commercial proposition. As estimated, the average annual production of a weaver family hardly leaves a surplus of 5.68 square metres of cloth for sale after meeting the family requirement. This hardly provide benefit to the weavers. Even those small number of weavers who produce with a commercial outlook, usually dispose of their products in the village market locally. As the scope of the
market and the demand of the customers are limited, hardly any efforts are made in the area of product and market development. No systematic pattern or strategy is evolved so far for marketing handloom textiles produced by the Bodos. As such sales provides only marginal income to the weavers. Similarly, the weavers co-operatives of the Bodo people produce their traditional dresses which have no market demand in general.

Under the circumstances, it has become necessary to make their production market-oriented with a commercial outlook. The scope of commercialisation of handloom textiles produced by the Bodo weavers will depend to a great extent on the possible product-diversification suitably designed for market demand based on product-planning and development. This can be done through modification of size, textures and finishing with proper colour combinations of the textiles produced by the weavers.

New Textile Policy and Handloom Sector

The New textile policy which was announced by the Government of India on 6th June 1985, also indicates certain significant changes in Government's approach to the growth and development of the textile industry. The new policy has done away with the three sector system, viz., mill, powerloom and handloom sector. Henceforth, there will be
only two sectors - the handloom and the powerloom. The policy aims at taking effective measures so that powerloom do not encroach upon articles reserved for handloom sector (see Appendix-IV). Even it proposes to increase the availability of cloth of acceptable quality to the growing population at reasonable price.

The new policy proposes to take series of steps to protect the handloom sector. Most important among these steps is that by the end of Seventh Plan, the responsibility for the entire production of controlled cloth would be transferred to the handloom sector. Other measures suggested to protect the handloom sector include modernisation and technological upgradation of handlooms, augmentation of yarn supply, encouragement of production of mixed and blended fabrics on handloom. For reservation of articles for exclusive production in the handloom sector provision has been made under the Handloom (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act, 1985. It also proposes to improve the competitiveness of handlooms vis-a-vis powerlooms.

The handloom sector will benefit immensely from the initiatives of the Government to upgrade the handloom technology and its decision to ensure the supplies of yarn at fair prices to this sector. A decision to permit the use of man-made fibres for weaving handloom textiles will also help in expanding markets for their products.
The policy not only aims at fashion and design development of the handloom fabrics, it also lays special emphasis on export of handloom products (see Appendix-IV). Mention may be made in this connection to a Study Group sponsored by the North Eastern Council during the last part of 1985. The Group headed by Prof. A.K. Sengupta of the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade was entrusted to make an indepth export potential survey of 123 selected products of the North Eastern Region including handlooms. The Study Group's report is expected to throw more light in the problems and prospects of export of handloom products.

It is heartening to note that the New Textile Policy has recognised the distinct and unique role of the handloom sector. The steps incorporated in the policy will go a long way in strengthening handloom weaving particularly in States like Assam where handloom weaving is an important cottage industry. The Contributory Thrift Fund Scheme and Workshed-cum-Housing Scheme, to provide better working and living conditions of the weavers, if properly pursued may prove to be an encouraging step for the tribal weavers in backward areas like Goalpara.

1. The Assam Tribune, July 21, 1985, p. 8
Conclusion

Handloom industry occupies an important place in our national economy. An estimated one-third clothing requirements of our country is met by this sector in addition to covering the export market. Handloom weaving of the Bodo people of Goalpara district is a women-dominated industry. Women are cultivator-cum-weaver and perhaps this is one of the influencing factors for their non-commercial attitude towards the industry. In fact, it cannot be denied that they have the skill and efficiency which needs to be only properly motivated and guided to make weaving a paying proposition.

Besides, it is also necessary to organise the weavers under a proper organisational setup providing all pre-loom and post-loom facilities so that the Bodo weavers will accept weaving as a profession. The weavers should also be made aware of the different channels of sales and to maintain a proper liasion with those sources. As the Bodo people are living in a subsistence economy, subsidiary occupation like handloom weaving has to be persued with special emphasis. It is, in this context, the development of handloom industry in a systematic and planned manner assumes special significance.