Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

Handloom weaving constitutes an integral and inseparable part of the Assamese household. It is an age-old traditional cottage industry of the State and has been practised irrespective of caste, creed or community. Weavers in Assam, received Royal patronage and rent-free lands and other favours. The Ahom kings, it is learnt, established a department of weaving and 'maintained skilled weavers to supply the royal wardrobe with clothes.'¹ Handloom weaving thus occupied a very important place in the economic and cultural life of the State and still reckoned as a prestigious cottage industry and practised as such, notwithstanding the competition from the mill-made fabrics.


"From remote antiquity", observes Prof. Barua, "Assam enjoyed a reputation as producing silk of a high degree of perfection."

There was reference to Assam silk in Kautilya's Arthasastra as the 'product of the country Subarnakudya is as red as the Sun, as soft as the surface of a gem, being woven while the threads are very wet, of uniform of mixed texture'.

Refer: Kautilya's Arthasastra (Assamese version) Edited by Devsarma Rajanikanta, Publication Board, Assam, 1977, p. 56
Importance of Handloom weaving in Socio-economic life of the Assamese people

In every Assamese household, particularly in rural areas, there is at least one loom for weaving clothes. Looms, therefore, not only have an economic importance (because it provides self-employment), it is also considered as a status symbol for the Assamese households. Weaving as a handicraft, occupies such an important place in Assamese society, that both culture and economics are interlinked to it. Silk dresses, produced in the family looms with beautiful and eye-catching designs is a prestigious and prized possession for every Assamese lady. It is a must for every social function of the Assamese people. As a matter of fact, dresses and designs produced in handlooms not only have economic importance, but also represents a sentiment which is manifested in the social customs of the people.

Unlike in other parts of the country, weavers of Assam, both in the plains and the hills, comprised mostly of women. It is, therefore, not surprising that every 'Assamese woman know how to weave and every care is taken to teach them weaving.' Attainment of skill in the art of weaving has always been held in high esteem by the

Assamese ladies. There was a time, when an Assamese girl was considered unfit for marriage if she fails to acquire the expertise in weaving. To quote Prof. Barua, "When a proposal of marriage is made the first question asked about the bride is whether she knows bowa-kata, i.e., whether she is skilled in spinning and weaving." 3

From the economic point of view, importance of handloom is next only to agriculture and almost every household in rural Assam are closely connected with weaving industry. As on December, 1980, there were 6.95 looms in Assam as against all-India total of 38.35 lakhs. 4 A sizable portion of the population in Assam are engaged in handloom weaving, and an estimated 7.86 lakh weavers depend on handloom weaving either wholly or partially.

Notwithstanding the importance of handloom weaving to the economy of the State, it is disheartening to note that only a limited number of weavers have taken to weaving as a whole-time or commercial preposition. According to a survey undertaken by the Directorate of Sericulture and Weaving in 1975-76, only a small of the State's 6.95 lakh

3. Ibid., p. 94

During 1951, there were reported to be 4.8 lakhs handlooms in Assam out of a total of all-India figure of 30 lakhs. (Goswami, P.C., Ibid., p. 166)
looms are operated in commercial lines.  

**Significance of handloom to Bodo people**

The Bodos are an important constituent of the weavers community of Assam. They meet a sizable quantity of their family requirement of clothes from their looms. This is exclusively done by the lady members of the family. Thus, it can be said that the handlooms weaving is a source of employment for the Bodo women-folk. From the point of view of number of persons employed, weaving is next only to agriculture. Therefore, handloom weaving plays an important role in the creation of self-employment opportunities for the Bodo people. It is a labour-intensive industry and is primarily instrumental in engaging the Bodo women-folk for a considerable period of the year.

The Bodos have a reputation as expert weavers of both cotton and endi clothes. But, like the majority of the Assamese weavers, a significant feature of the Bodo weavers is that they are non-professional in outlook.

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Socio-economic life of Bodos

The Bodos or Boros are, the most noteworthy Mongoloid people in eastern India and Assam. There are numerous Mongoloid races inhabiting the hills and plains of Assam. They are also scattered in the Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Tripura and in parts of Bengal, Bihar and adjoining areas of Bangladesh. The Bodo-Kachari and Dimasa-Kachari of Assam otherwise referred to as the plains tribe and the hills-tribe respectively originally belongs to the same stock of people. The present abode of the Dimasa-Kacharis is confined mainly in the North-Cachar Hills District and the Bodo-Kacharis are found scattered in the Brahmaputra Valley.

The Bodo-Kacharis may perhaps be described as the earliest known settlers of the Brahmaputra Valley, the

6. According to Prof. S.K. Chatterjee, the Bodo people belong to Indo-Mongoloid group and originated from the North-Western China between the head-waters of Huang-Ho and the Yang-tse-kiang rivers.

(Chatterjee, S.K., The Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India, (1970), pp. 9,10)

Also see, Bhattacharya, P.C., A Descriptive Analysis of the Bodo Language, (1977), p. 7

Shri Rajmohan Nath indicated that the Bodo people came to North-Eastern Region and Assam from Tibet which was originally known as "Bod".

(Nath, Rajmohan, The Background of Assamese Culture (1978), pp. 15, 16)
Kacharis call themselves as "Bodo" or "Bodo-Fisa" and in the North-Cachar Hills as "Dimasa" or "Dima-Fisa". "Bodo-Fisa", literally means the children or the descendent of Bodo. Similarly, "Dimasa" or "Dima-Fisa" literally means the children or descendent of a big river. To the Ahoms, they are known as "Timisa", clearly originated from the Dimasa.7

Besides, the Bodo-Kacharis are known by different names in different parts of Assam. In North-Cachar and in the Brahmaputra Valley, they are known as 'Kacharis' and sometimes 'Boros'. In Goalpara district, they are known as 'Mech' or 'Boro'.8 Even today, 'Mech-para', a village of Goalpara district inhabited mostly by Bodo people bears testimony to this.

The social structure of the Bodos are patriarchal with a very few elements of matriarchal characteristics. The court-yard of a Bodo family contains the altar of "Bathow", who is the Supreme God of Bodo religion. The court-yard not only serves as the place of worships but also a place of diverse activities connected with agricultural works, family get-together, social gatherings and above all, it is the main platform of handloom weaving activities of the Bodo people.

The condition of the Bodo people of erstwhile Goalpara district is a reflection of their subsistence economy. Villages are the centre of the well-knit and closed society of the Bodo people and agriculture forms the backbone of their income and livelihood. All the working members of the family are engaged in cultivation and allied agricultural activities. However, earning from farming activities are hardly sufficient to provide them a steady income throughout the year.

Handloom weaving, as a family-based and women-dominated industry provides self-employment and income to the Bodo people. Weaving is, therefore, an economic necessity for the Bodo people.

The Bodo population of Goalpara district has increased considerably over the years. But, the social problems of a traditional society with their limited source of income stands in the way of the very process of growth. With agriculture as their prime occupation and illiteracy still a stumbling social obstruction it is difficult to initiate any move to divert the majority of the Bodo people to other vocations. It will be equally difficult to change a society overnight as they are rooted with their age-old tradition and customs. Under the circumstances, handloom weaving is the only viable alternative economic activity which may bring about socio-economic transformation of the
Bodo society. This is because, the handloom clothes have a great influence and closely linked to the life and culture of the Bodo people and are invariably used in every cultural and religious functions.

**Geographical location**

The district of Goalpara is situated at the extreme end of the north-western part of Assam, between latitudes of 25.28 and 26.54 North and longitudes of 89.42 and 90.06 East and covering an area of 10,359.0 square kilometres. There are 4023 villages in the district of which 3819 villages are inhabited and remaining 204 villages are uninhabited. The villages spread over 20 Development Blocks and 115 Gaon Panchayats.

9. The greater part of Goalpara consist of a level plain, the lower portion of which is intersected by the mighty Brahmaputra. A few outlying spurs of the Assam Hills Range project towards the river from South and even appear on the north bank of Brahmaputra. The northern and western part of the district is flat but the central portion is broken by the small ranges of low hills. There are several rows of small hillocks on the east and south, projecting from the Garo Hills and reaching down the Brahmaputra.


Background of Goalpara district

After annexation of Assam by the Britishers in 1826, Goalpara district was transferred from Bengal to Assam. But, in 1867, the three Thanas of Goalpara, Dhubri and Karoibari were re-transferred to Bengal to form a part of the Coacb-Behar Commissionership. These changes occurred shortly after the Duars were annexed to British India. In 1874, the Duars along with those Thanas were again transferred to Assam to form the Goalpara district. It again became a part of the then East Bengal in 1905. In 1912, the whole district was permanently transferred to Assam.

Up to 1951, the district had two Sub-divisions, viz., Dhubri and Goalpara. To facilitate administrative efficiency Kokrajhar was declared as the third Sub-division.

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11. According to Gait, in ancient times, Goalpara formed a part of the kingdom of Pragjyotishpur or Kamrupa, which extended southwards as far as the Bay of Bengal and its western boundary was extended to Kartoya river. Ancient Kamrup was divided in four parts and Goalpara was included in the division of Ratnapith.

12. It is said that the name Goalpara is corrupt form of the word - 'Guwali' or 'Guwal' - meaning milkman.
(Barooah, D.P., Gazetteer of India, Assam State, Goalpara District, 1979, p. 1)

of the district on 9th February, 1957. These Sub-divisions of erstwhile Goalpara district were upgraded to three separate districts from First July, 1983, as Kokrajhar, Goalpara and Dhubri district, vide Gazettee Notification No. GAG.227/83/7, No. GAG.212/83/9 and No. GAG.238/83/1 dated June 25, 1983, respectively.

Bodos of Goalpara district

According to 1971 Census, the total population in Assam was 1,46,25,152 which included 6,10,459 Bodo-Kachari population inhabiting in different parts of the State. The population in Goalpara district was 22,25,103 including 2,38,260 Bodo-Kachari, which constitutes 10.7 per cent of the total population in the district. A decade-wise population trend in the erstwhile Goalpara district is shown in Table I.1. The sudden increase in the population during the decades 1951-1961 and 1961-1971, was primarily due to immigration of people from erstwhile East Pakistan.


Table I.1

Population trend in Goalpara district

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>4,62,555</td>
<td>2,42,957</td>
<td>2,19,598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>6,01,198</td>
<td>3,18,776</td>
<td>2,82,422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>7,68,052</td>
<td>4,06,906</td>
<td>3,56,146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>8,88,288</td>
<td>4,70,557</td>
<td>4,12,731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>10,14,285</td>
<td>5,39,437</td>
<td>4,74,848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>11,08,124</td>
<td>5,88,999</td>
<td>5,19,125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>15,43,892</td>
<td>8,12,723</td>
<td>7,31,169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>22,25,103</td>
<td>11,54,449</td>
<td>10,70,654</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census 1971

Table I.2, exhibits the decade-wise growth of Bodo-Kachari population in the Goalpara district since 1951 to 1971.  

Table 1.2

Statement showing the number of Bodo-Kachari population in Goalpara District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>70,579</td>
<td>62,146</td>
<td>1,32,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>80,350</td>
<td>78,381</td>
<td>1,58,731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>1,20,127</td>
<td>1,18,133</td>
<td>2,38,260</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census 1951, 1961 and 1971

Literates among Bodos

Literates among the Bodo people of Goalpara district constitutes 23.3 of the total Bodo population according to 1971 Census. This is far less than the percentage of literates among the Scheduled tribes population of Assam as shown in Table 1.3. What is more disturbing is that literates among the Bodo females are abysmally low. Of a total 1.18 lakhs females, the number of literates was only 16,126, which accounts for 13.65 per cent. 17

Table 1.3

Literacy among the Bodo people of Goalpara district

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/District/</th>
<th>Total population (in lakh)</th>
<th>Percentage of Literacy to the total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>country</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Assam</td>
<td>146.25</td>
<td>77.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/T population</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Assam</td>
<td>16.07</td>
<td>8.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/T population</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of Goalpara district</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boro-Kochari</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>population of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara district</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All India</td>
<td>5481.60</td>
<td>2248.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census 1971

Status of women

The Bodo people have their own social laws and customs with a number of regional variations. The position of woman in their society is almost equal to that of man. The women are naturally industrious and also share the pleasure of working equally with the male members in the field as well as in other household activities.

Handloom weaving is one of the major cottage industry of the Bodo people. It is an exclusive business of the women-folk. Women are expert weavers and most of
their clothing requirements for household are met from their own looms. In fine, Bodo ladies are not dependent on others insofar as their dresses are concerned.

**Occupational pattern**

Agriculture is the primary occupation and main source of income of the Bodo people. They are mainly engaged in the cultivation of paddy as the principal crop as well as in production of vegetables, betel-nuts and betel-leaves abundantly. The Bodo home-stead is also a self-sufficient unit with piggery and poultry.

**Life Style**

The Bodo people of Goalpara district is an important constituent of the total population of Assam. They generally prefer to live amidst the natural surroundings which is reflected on their handloom designs. The life style of the Bodo people is widely influenced by their socio-economic structure of traditional economy and cultural heritage. They prefer to lead a community life isolating themselves from the modern influence and changes.
Folkdances of Bodos in traditional dresses
Standard of living

The Bodo people are settled agriculturists and agriculture is their primary source of income and livelihood. But, as their method of cultivation is primitive, it is but natural that their return from farming is quite low. Allied agricultural activities like poultry and piggery hardly given them any additional income. Handloom weaving is practised by the women-folk to provide them with the family clothings. Occasional marketing of handloom clothes may best be described as distress 'selling' rather than with any commercial outlook. Under compelling circumstances, no doubt, some of the Bodo young men have taken to salaried employment of lower cadres. But, even such deviation hardly improves their overall economic condition. In the circumstances, standard of living of the Bodo people is nowhere near the satisfactory level.

Handloom weaving amongst the Bodos of Goalpara district

Handloom weaving constitutes an integral part of Bodo culture. A Bodo household with a loom is almost a rarity and one rarely comes across a Bodo girl who has not acquired the skill of spinning and weaving. The Bodo women-folk are expert weavers, and they weave their fabrics with excellent colour combinations. To have a glimpse of the beautifully coloured and exquisitively designed Bodo
handlooms, one has to see the beautifully attired Bodo belles in the traditional dresses, dancing to the tune of drums in the 'Bagarumba' and New Year celebrations. The dresses that they weave and wear is a part of their living tradition.

According to the survey conducted by the Directorate of Sericulture and Weaving during 1975-76, there are little over thirty-three thousand weaver families in the Goalpara district. Of this, the number of Scheduled Tribes weavers were 16,527, which included also the Bodo weavers. But, a significant characteristics of the Bodo weavers is that they are not professional weavers. They usually produce only such quantity of clothes which are considered necessary for their households. The Bodos, particularly the ladies, are so much attached to the hand spun and weaving of clothes

18. 'Bagarumba' is a spring time dance where dancing girls commonly used yellow 'Dokhna' and red 'gumgna' with 'Hajo' (mountain) design. The dancers taking both the ends of the coloured scruf spread around the neck, move like butterflies. In performing the dance, the dancing girls step forward and then recede backward keeping the rhythm of the song sung by themselves or others. The dances which begins in horizontal lines, takes a circular pattern with the flow. (Pandey, V., Assam the land of Sankardeva, 1979, pp. 92, 93)

that they use very little mill-made clothes. Even during the present time when they are regularly plagued by irregular supply and high prices of raw materials and the market flooded with mill-made clothes, almost the entire Bodo ladies and majority of the gents are seen attired in their traditional dresses.

The Bodo weavers are engaged in the production of both cotton and silk (eri) fabrics. While the yarns for the cotton fabrics are procured from the market, the endi yarns are indigenously manufactured. Presently, the Bodos are taking to Muga culture in a scattered way. After rearing the Muga worms, they sell the cocoons to the traders. Hence, the Bodos do not weave Muga clothes in their looms.

Handloom weaving has thus come to be regarded as an integral part of the Bodo society. Weaving plays a very significant role in both the cultural and economic life of Bodos of Goalpara district.

Objectives and hypothesis

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the economics of handloom weaving of the Bodo people of erstwhile Goalpara district. The study therefore, relates to the different aspects of handloom weaving as practised by the Bodo people in the district. It has been tried to assess the present pattern of working of handloom weaving of the
Bodo people both in organised and unorganised sectors and to suggest measures for improvement of handloom weaving which may contribute to their economic development.

**Methodology**

Information collected on the different aspects of handloom weaving of the Bodo people of Goalpara district, are mainly based on documentary and field surveys and personal contacts. As the Bodos are a homogenous group of people, areas for study were purposively selected. As the Bodo weavers are mostly concentrated in the selected areas 91 households from these areas were chosen for case study on random sampling basis. As such in the chapters to be followed findings were shown on the basis of frequency distribution of 91 households. Secondary sources of data wherever available have been utilised as far as possible. To test the validity of hypothesis, necessary questionnaires and schedules were prepared and data were collected on random sampling basis. Besides, statistical method is applied to analyse the data and to arrive at a conclusion.

**Conclusions**

Handlooms have come to stay as a vital sector of the rural economy. It is a cottage industry in the very sense of the term and has tremendous impact on a large
section of rural population. As a matter of fact, the Bodo weavers of Goalpara district specially women-folk, are found engaged wholly or partially in this vocation. But, it is still being practised as a non-commercial activity devoid of any professional outlook.

The characteristic features of economic life of the Bodo people has highlighted the importance of handloom weaving. Besides, it can be considered as a better means to remove their loss of mandays in unproductive engagement and to ensure a regular flow of income and employment. In view of the significant role that can be played by the handlooms, a new outlook and approach will have to be undertaken to motivate the weavers to accept this trade as a profession with adequate facilities for commercialisation of looms. It will ultimately lead to their economic upliftment assuring a continuous source of income.