Chapter II

HAND LOOM AS A COTTAGE INDUSTRY

Introduction

In an agricultural oriented rural economy handloom weaving may substantially contribute to the economic well-being of the rural people. As a matter of fact, from time immemorial handloom weaving has been recognised as an important cottage industry of Assam. According to 1971 Census, 91.18 per cent of the total population of Assam lives in the rural areas and 76.68 per cent of the rural people in the State are directly or indirectly engaged in agricultural activities as a primary source of their livelihood. However, as agriculture is a seasonal occupation and its production is primarily dependent on nature, income from agriculture is uncertain and limited. Besides, once the harvest is over, they sit idle for the remaining period of the year without any gainful employment. This situation can definitely be improved provided there are scope for additional employment opportunities during the non-harvesting period. Cottage industry like handloom weaving, can provide this much needed avenue for additional income.

Importance of Handloom as Cottage-industry

For the Bodo people of Goalpara district, handloom weaving is an important cottage industry. As a rural based industry, weaving of handloom textiles is a widely practised household work of Bodos. But, their production is limited in scale as much of the production is primarily intended for domestic consumption.

Another important aspect of handloom weaving of the Bodo people is that the female members play the pivotal role, while the male members practically do not involve themselves in this industry. The young girls also offer helping hand in the pre-weaving and post-weaving activities. As such, every Bodo family may be considered a weaving unit. But, they regard the weaving activities as an off-time-work with a seasonal involvement. As a result, production of handloom textile is seriously hampered during their cultivation and harvesting period. It is only when they are free from agricultural works that they engage in weaving activities. And generally, it is in winter season that the Bodos wholeheartedly concentrate in weaving activities. During rainy season, the Bodo weavers generally keep away from weaving activities considering the possibility of damage to yarns as well as engagement in cultivation works.
**Socio-cultural value**

Handloom weaving occupies a significant position in the socio-cultural life of the Bodo people. They prefer to use their handwoven dresses with sophisticated designs in their social and religious functions. For the Bodo people, therefore, handloom weaving has a special significance from the socio-economic point of view. In their marriage ceremonies, the bride preferably use handwoven "Dokhna" and "gumgra". Similarly, in their religious festival "Kherai", the lady priest "Doudini" strictly wear the yellow "Dokhna" to perform the religious rituals.

**Involvement of female members**

The Bodo ladies can weave clothes of various indigenous designs on their looms which is a significant aspect of their domestic life. All the female members ranging from young girls to aged women, are engaged in weaving their own dresses. Even weaving constitutes the most essential part of girl's education and the lack of it does her discredit.

As ascertained during field survey, 67.03 per cent of the weavers belong to the age-group of 21 to 40 years of

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2. See Chapter IV.
which majority belongs to 30 years of age. The percentage of the Bodo weavers according to different age-group is shown in Table II.1.

Table II.1

Percentage of distribution of age-group of Bodo weavers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age-group</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-40</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>67.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-60</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>91</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey

The predominant skill among the Bodo ladies is weaving. They are expert in both pre-loom and post-loom activities.\(^3\) It is significant to note that the Bodo ladies acquire this skill from their elders through practice. Weaving, therefore, comes to them naturally and for which

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3. **Pre-loom activities** are a process of preparation warp and beam before actual weaving. It includes bleaching, dyeing, sizing, winding of yarns on bobbins, warping, beaming, drafting, denting, tying up of heald etc.

**Post-loom activities** include processes generally adopted after actual weaving of cloth. Such as, proper finishing, printing, calendering etc.
Bodo ladies are regarded as weavers by tradition.

The spinning of both cotton and endi yarns in crude form by using "Takli" is also regarded as a special work of women. The rearing of endi, spinning of yarn and the weaving of warm cloth "Endisi" is considered as a routine work for the women. It requires hard labour to produce a piece of endi cloth. From the time of rearing endi-worms till their growth and maturity, the women move about in groups to collect the feeding leaf of the worms. They are required to take proper care for the worms to get the expected return. Thus the women alone perform the function of care-taker, yarn producer and weaver.

In respect of procurement of yarns and other implements, it is the women who have to take the responsibility. They collect their raw materials from the local traders, merchants and weekly markets. The Bodo weavers install their looms in convenient places, particularly on court-yard. The women weavers of the Bodos, therefore, can be regarded as the centre around which handloom industry revolves.

**Labour-intensive industry**

Handloom weaving as practised by the Bodos is a manual operation and as such it offers part-time engagement to a good number of people. It is important to note in this
connection that economy of the Bodo people is characterised by the existence of surplus labour-force. To engage this surplus labour-force in gainful employment, neither industries are there nor there is available capital to make provision for investment in other areas. Moreover, factors like high pressure of population on land, fragmentation and subdivision of land holdings as well as illiteracy have contributed to unemployment and under-employment in the Bodo society. In the circumstances, the handloom weaving is the only labour-intensive industry and if properly encouraged and modernised would provide a scope of self-employment in the rural areas.

Mode of operation

The operational size of the handloom weaving is small and localised. The Bodo people are by nature home-loving and conservative. Their illiteracy, lack of alternative means of employment, social and religious conventions have forced them to stick to their age-old traditional profession. They feel more independent and comfortable while working amidst their family surroundings. Therefore, they prefer to undertake the spinning and weaving activities in a family atmosphere.
Weaving is a social and at the same time traditional culture of the Bodo people. But, it is still being practised as a non-professional traditional culture which centres round the family. As weaving is not a profession by caste or creed, there is no weaving community or caste among the Bodo people of Goalpara district. The Bodos treat weaving as a part of their culture and practically every household is engaged in this work at sometime or another. But, despite their engagement in this trade, the Bodos are not able to secure enough to sustain themselves and their families. This is because the Bodos are yet to recognise the commercial importance of this very important cottage industry.

Besides, there is a system among the Bodo people to undertake weaving of cloth occasionally, on share basis. In this practice, the weaver will take yarns from other families with an agreement to share a part of the total production. But, it is not a regular practice.

The Bodos generally engage in weaving activities mainly during the non-harvesting period which ranges from

four to six months in a year. As a result, the number of
days gainfully employed by the Bodo weavers is estimated at
average 121 days in a year with a daily engagement of two
hours. This calculation is arrived at on the basis of
frequency distribution of 49 weavers representing 53.85 per
cent of the total 91 weaver-households covered in the survey.
However, ten per cent of the weavers are engaged in weaving
activities side by side with agriculture throughout the year.

Table II.2
Frequency distribution of time-devoted by Bodo weavers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Time devoted (in days)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1-90</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>91-180</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>53.85</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>181-270</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.59</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>271-360</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>91</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Field Survey*

**Handloom as economic unit**

Unemployment and inequality of income may be
considered as an important feature of the rural economy of
the Bodo people. Further, lack of industrial infrastructure
and low rate of capital formation have made their rural economy stagnant. It is, in this context, one has to judge the role of handloom weaving as a provider of supplementary source of income to the Bodo families. As a matter of fact, for the Bodos a set of loom is regarded as a family asset and as such an economic unit. However, production of handlooms are linked to the family requirements, i.e., family is the unit of both production and consumption. Even as a community also, they are economically interdependent on one another.

These socio-economic characteristics of the Bodos combined with absence of modern technological aids, has made handloom weaving a non-commercial proposition. Notwithstanding the economic importance and viability of handloom-weaving the Bodos are a set of non-professional weavers. Despite these characteristics, there is no denying the fact that handloom-weaving of the Bodos has tremendous economic importance and should be treated as such.

Conclusion

Handloom weaving as a traditional cottage-industry forms an important element for the socio-cultural unity of the Bodo people. Besides, the contribution of handloom weaving to the economic well-being of the people is also significant. It is a source of additional income and
employment particularly to the women-folk of the Bodo people in the district. Bodo people are by nature are settled agriculturists and their predominant occupation is agriculture. But, agriculture alone cannot create income and employment avenues beneficially all the year round. As a matter of fact, the existence of surplus labour-force resulted large-scale unemployment and under-employment problem among the Bodo people. In this context, it is to be considered that there is no alternative except to develop the handloom industry to absorb the large number of women labour force and to provide a source of income to the persons engaged in allied weaving activities. As a cottage industry with its rural background, weaving is a suitable means to bring about an economic regeneration in the life and culture of the Bodo people.