The cottage industrial scenario of Sualkuchi is strengthened mainly by the role of handloom industry only. It would be an under-emphasis to consider the handloom industry of Sualkuchi only as producer of handloom fabrics, if its contribution to the rural economy of Sualkuchi is not observed. This cottage industry is based on traditional customs, practices and hereditary knowledge of weavers. It has been observed that the art and culture of not only of Assam but entire Northeast has been exposed to handloom since long. Not only at present but all through out, the Assamese weavers have always woven finer fabrics that have great demand and have always garnered appreciation from all section of people. The weavers mostly do not have any institutional background in handloom weaving. They learn the art of weaving from their parents with regular practice. The village of Sualkuchi is known to be the largest village in Asia. It has many adjacent villages that fall outside the demarcated boundary of Sualkuchi. For our study purpose, we will concentrate only in Sualkuchi. Here agriculture comes next to handloom industry. Weaving has become the prime source of income generation for both farmer weavers and only weavers. An attractive feature of weaving at Sualkuchi is engagement of the whole family into the profession.

2.1 Geographical location of the Sualkuchi Village

Sualkuchi is a small census town though it is not a revenue township. It consists of two revenue villages that are Sualkuchi and Bamun Sualkuchi. It
stands on the North bank of the Brahmaputra 32 Km west of Guwahati. The two combined revenue villages or census towns popularly known as Sualkuchi covers an area of 12 km, 4 km from east to west and 3 km from North to South to the bank of the mighty river. It provides residence to 21,252 local people excluding the migrants i.e. migrant weavers and other labours as per 2001 census. The 1951 census had classed it as a "very large" village with a population of 7598 out of which only 487 persons (6.40%) were dependent on agriculture. Its population had increased to 12,087 in 1961, 13,773 in 1971 and 14,310 in 1991 (there was no census in 1981) covering an area of 3.4 sq.km; excluding probably the revenue village of Bamun Sualkuchi.

A visit during any time of the day, a passer by on the streets of Sualkuchi will get attracted by the soft and rhythmic dhak-dhuk of the shuttle flying across the frame looms found in every home. If we happen to peer over the shoulder of any of the women weaving and chances are we will see them creating beautiful gamusas (multi-purpose scarves) or Mekhela Chadors. The gamusa is typically white with red ornamentation and the Mekhela Chadors are also in shades of cream, off-white or white with multi-coloured ornamentation. It is seen often on pale backgrounds of Eri, Muga or Pat, the weavers of Sualkuchi using their varied imaginations create a veritable rainbow of motifs and designs using bright contrasting colours. As a matter of fact handloom weaving in the fly shuttle handloom and its associated activities
are the occupation of 90% of the population of the locality. The rattle of the fly shuttle starts at eight in the morning and continues till ten at night with a lunch break from twelve noon to two afternoon. The market of the hand woven products determines the fate not only of the loom owners but also of the wage weavers and the helpers, yarn winders etc. The local elite likes to call Sualkuchi the Manchester of Assam.

Kautilya has mentioned in his Arthashastra about Sualkuchi as "golden land" because of the colour in the clothes woven by the folks of Sualkuchi. It is situated about 5 km from Saraighat Bridge that is after crossing the river from Guwahati. Legends hold it that in this region the mighty Brahmaputra River took a sharp bow-turn, which was then straightened, by the then kings of Assam King Naranarayan and King Silarai transformed it into a rivulet and turned towards the main stream. Thereafter, the bank of the main stream came to be known as Sualkuchi where from again a big chunk was choked up by the river. The inhabitants are mostly Hindu and are strict followers of Shrimanta Shankerdeva the great Vaishnava leader.

2.2 Economic background of Sualkuchi

In the village of Sualkuchi, though quite near to Guwahati city, the degree of urbanization is low. Apart from the handloom industry there is no other major industrialization. If analyzed from the perspective of low urbanization and inadequate progress in the field of industries, then these factors indicate that the village is not having sufficient economic activities. The
inhabitants of the village do not lag behind in the state literacy rate. Therefore, as the local people are mostly literate the village is safe from wasteful exploitation of resources. The state too is relieved from heavy responsibility like incurring large expenditure on social, educational and ameliorative measures that become mandatory to undertake to improve the conditions of totally backward areas. Sualkuchi was a “craft village” having several cottage industries till the forties of the last century. Besides the handloom industry of the Tantis, oil pressing in the traditional ‘ghani’ in the Keotpara segment, goldsmithy of the Sonaripara hamlet, pottery in the Kumarpura hamlet and silk rearing and reeling occupation of a particular community at West Sualkuchi comprised some of the cottage industries. The industries other than handloom are now nowhere found in Sualkuchi.

2.3 Ancient weaving of Sualkuchi

Weaving in Assam is as old as the days of Kautilya. In his famous work the Arthashastra, Kautilya had mentioned several principalities of ancient Kamrupa or Assam like Joapa, Yonga, Ashokagrama, Grameru, Anataravatya, Paarlauhitya and Suvarnakudya where several valuable products preserving in the royal treasury were manufactured. He had also written that there was a principality named Suvarnakudya in ancient Kamrup famous for its silk industry. Out of the silk fabrics three varieties are worth mentioning – they are Dakula, Khauma and Patrnoma. Historians like Kanaklal Barua, Birinchi Kr. Barua and Pratap Ch. Chowdhury have identified Dakula
as Muga, Khauma as Eri and Patrorna as Pat and had identified a village 'Sonkudiha', a few miles South of Nalbari town, with Suvarnakudya.\textsuperscript{11} Kautilya wrote that Dakula was as red as the rays of sun and as soft as the surface of the gem. About Patrorna he said Pat fabrics were produced in Magadha, Pundra and Suvarnakudya – among the products those of Suvarnakudya were the best.\textsuperscript{12} The above-mentioned references from Kautilya show the glories of silk weaving industry of Suvarnakudya of the fourth century B.C.

It is learnt that prior to weaving Muga and Mulberry at Sualkuchi, Spun silk or Canton silk was woven.\textsuperscript{13} The raw materials required for weaving Spun silk was imported from Canton in China.\textsuperscript{14} The folks of Sualkuchi used to dress in cotton fabrics for daily use and Spun silk fabric was use during festive or special occasions. The clothes used for daily purposes were woven by the people themselves. In those days weaving was not done as a commercial practice. The first type of commercial dress woven for commercial purpose was the "Garo Bhuni", the wedding dress of the Garo tribe.\textsuperscript{15} After this, Dhara, Jem Seng (Khasi dresses) were woven for commercial purpose. For about two hundred years, the weavers of Sualkuchi earned their livelihood by weaving these clothes.\textsuperscript{16} Dhara and Jem-seng are still woven at Sualkuchi. Later, shawls from Spun silk were also woven. The present day roll (than) system of Muga cloth manufacturing was pioneered by Gondho Ram Morol, which can be dated to eighteenth century A.D.\textsuperscript{17} It is not known to which...
Ahom king, but he used to give a roll of Muga cloth in lieu of tax. In those days, spinning of yarn was done by helpers/labours but weaving was done by skillful weavers only. Quality of cloth in ancient time was determined by its thickness and coarseness. Every roll of Muga cloth was sold at the price of Rs.5.00 to Rs.8.00. Weaving was done in country loom. After the second world war fly shuttle looms were started at Sualkuchi. The weavers of Sualkuchi are known for the wonders of weaving twinkling stars from the sky so efficiently that laurels pouring on these weavers have not stopped since days immemorial. It could not be traced when specimen of designs or flowers came into use. A person named Padma Ram Bayan started to use the specimen of designs for weaving purpose in 1914. It has also come to be known that the people of Sualkuchi were exempted from being requisitioned in the battle fought during British rule with the Abors- tribes of the then North East Frontier Agency, now known as Arunachal Pradesh.

The Ahom reign brought vast progress in the handloom sector of Sualkuchi. But the same could not happen during the British regime in India. Instead, tax was made applicable on using of Som and Soalu trees for rearing of Muga cocoons. The inhabitants of Sualkuchi even with such constraints carried on their duties related to handloom industry. Till pre-independence period Sualkuchi had faced difficulties in running the handloom industry. A revolutionary change in the production of Muga and Mulberry cloths were
observed after the year 1939. This change was brought into by Kaliram Karikar. Under the guidance of Sunderman, the then Superintendent of Gauhati Weaving School, Kaliram Karikor applied novice methodology in handloom weaving. Fly shuttle looms replaced country looms and drums were used for reeling instead of hands. It was Karikor who pioneered the use of Jaquarded machine at Sualkuchi. The Jaquarded machine brought drastic change in the art of handloom sector. Handloom weaving thus got transferred from household occupation to factory based profession because of hard labour of Kaliram Karikor. When the second world war started, the inhabitants of Sualkuchi mostly remained confined too local trade and business of handloom weaving. Hence, it resulted in increasing of looms between three to four in every household between 1939 to 1946 and people began to think about weaving from commercial aspects. Kaliram Karikar always employed skillful designers to cut out new designs in graph papers which could be easily adopted in correct measurement while weaving. It was under the supervision of Kaliram Karikor, Rajen Deka and Dharmeswar Karikor that the famous 'Kaziranga Design' was drawn in graph paper. It was Rajen Deka who made the silhouette of Mahatma Gandhi on a cloth and earned his laurels. In 1946 the process of manufacturing the first pair of Muga Chadar Mekhela was started.

Sualkuchi is also known as the "land of golden threads." The village based on the banks of mighty Brahmaputra is also a village of traders and
merchants. The river became a very good way of communication between traders since the ancient times. Sualkuchi is also known for Vaishnavism and its founder Shrimanta Shankerdeva but today Sualkuchi village is more famous for it silk clothes only. The sounds of drums and cymbals from Naamghars, prayers chanting from Kirtan Ghars and the sound of weaving merge together to form such a divine rhythm that is nowhere found in any villages of Assam. Since, time immemorial the folk of Sualkuchi are engaged in the art of weaving and even today in the twenty-first century where everything is fast changing into techno based, the methods adopted for weaving are almost same but the weavers have become more adept to the art. A child of seven years to a septuagenarian all seem to follow that work is worship.

The weaving practice of Sualkuchi has a very luminous past. Historians have acknowledged that Chandra Gupta Maurya was the first Hindu King and it was his able minister and economist Kautilya the first to mention about Sualkuchi's weaving in his writings. As per his writings it was said that in "Suvarnakuj " a place in ancient Kamrup weaving as a household practice was gaining popularity amidst the local people. As per a class of Historians the geographical boundary of ancient Kamrup was Suvarnakuj and it was here in Suvarnakuj that handloom industry started its development. Kautilya's Arthashastra belongs to about 3rd century B.C, hence it can be claimed that Suvarnakuda's or Assam's handloom industry gained a very special position in the list of cottage industry from that time onwards. Another class of
historians suggests that during 3rd century B.C, Assam was inhabited by various tribes and prime occupation of these tribes was agriculture, animal rearing, spinning and weaving. But as local history of Sualkuchi says that the people of this village did not belong to any of these tribes and they were neither engaged in Polu rearing nor in spinning Eri yarns, they were solely engaged in weaving Pat and Muga silk clothes.

A collection of historical data also reflects the past glory of Sualkuchi. These data bring to light that during 606 B.C. when King Harshavardhan was reigning Northern India, then Pragjyotishpur was ruled by Kumar Bhaskar Barman. Between these two kings existed a very congenial relationship. During the reign of King Harshavardhan Chinese traveler Hieun Tsang visited Pragjyotishpur. He wrote a wonderful book on Pragjyotishpur. When he returned to the palace of King Harshavardhan then as a mark of friendship Kumar Bhaskar Barman sent a beautifully crafted bamboo tray made by Assamese craftsman. He also gifted many other valuable items and amongst these there were clothes made from "Patrorna" and "Khouma", which were woven by weavers from Suvarnakuj. If observed through these incidents the glory of handloom industry of Sualkuchi cannot but be acknowledged. During the reign of Ahom kings in Assam for six hundred years handloom industry flourished in Assam in each and every household as a popular cottage industry. According to the notes of littérateur Captain Wells, Robinson and Pemberton it comes to notice that during the middle age most of the people of Assam were engaged in weaving of Eri and Muga clothes. The scripts and
notes of different littérature proves that the people of Assam were engaged in handloom industry since time immemorial and it is in Sualkuchi that handloom industry flourished to the greatest extent.

2.4 Historical insight into Sualkuchi Village

After the decline of Pal and Barman dynasty during 3rd–4th century B.C ancient Kamrup witnessed a chaotic political situation. After this turmoil ancient Kamrup could not be brought under a single ruler but several small kings in different parts of the state rose into power. Even in Sualkuchi a king by the name Mahendra came into regime. King Mahendra built up a city by his name at the frontier of Garo hills. This place came to be known as Mahendra Ganj, presently the location is situated at the boundary of Garohills and South–west of Goalpara. Historian Rajmohan Nath describes in “The Background Of Assamese Culture” that ruins of innumerable temples and forts all over the area from Phulbari to Garobandha along the foot of Garo hills testify to the glory of this last family of one of the most ancient dynasties of Kamrup. The name of the last King Mahendra – who was incidentally a Koch of Sualkuchi and who inherited the throne by marrying the princess and heir – is commemorated in the name of his city – Mahendra Ganj. Even in those times the folks of Sualkuchi were not only adept in works of religion, literature and craft – but also possessed the power to occupy other places by means of warfare; be a king and built a city in his own name. During those times Mirzanathan from Delhi was in a mission in Assam, understood Sualkuchi to
be a secure place decided to build a mansion on the other side of the river Brahmaputra opposite the aforesaid fort of Sualkuchi, for his own residence with his children. The famous Saraighat Battle was fought and won at Sualkuchi by the Ahoms. Many battles were fought between Ahom and Mohammedans in this region. History remains silent witness to it.

It was the king of Vishnu dynasty who gave the designation of Brahmottar to a certain class of Brahmins and was made to settle at Sualkuchi. These Brahmins were given the responsibility to make Sualkuchi a center of excellence in religion and literature. According to Kathaguru Charit - Barduwa in Upper Assam, Shrihati (near Sualkuchi) in Kamrup and at Kochbehar, in Lower Assam, were centers for learning of Sanskrit knowledge. During the reign of Vishnu dynasty famous poet Ananta Kondoli wrote many books in Sanskrit and composed Dasam, Kumar Haran and translated Ramayana in Kamrupia language (local dialect of Kamrup). This famous poet was born at Hajo, another nearby village of Sualkuchi. Many other famous littérateur of this period like Ram Saraswati, Durgabor and Shridhar Kondoli were from Sualkuchi. At present Sualkuchi has more than forty-five Naamghars. The religious and simple-minded Vaishnavite and Hindu folks of Sualkuchi try their best to spread the message of yesteryears scholars. It has come to light that celebration for spiritual leaders are solemnized at Sualkuchi like the event of Janmatsov of Shrimanta Shankerdeva like the rest of India observes for other Gurus. Eminent scholars
come to this place across India and spread knowledge and peace mantras through discussions in open field, distributing souvenirs etc. Sualkuchi is secured not only by its bountiful nature but also in its socio-culture, trade and commerce. During the attack by the Moghuls in Assam, apart from Sualkuchi, names of other places -Koch, Hajo came to be known to outsiders. Hajo was the capital of Kamrup during the reign of King Parikshit. After the demise of King Parikshit, minister of his kingdom like Sayed Babakar, Sheikh Kamal still carried on the capital of ancient Kamrup in Hajo itself. The spread of Islamic religion in Assam was initiated by Sultan Ghiasuddin Aulia and his burial place is still preserved at Goruachal hill, which is famously known as Poa Mecca Masjid. Poa Mecca is a sacred place for every Muslim. Prior to 15th century Sualkuchi was extended up to Amrajuri. The main tributary of Brahmaputra flowed besides Hajo and towards North beside Bongsor. The mighty river had sucked up a large part of Sualkuchi. It may be recalled here that the name of Pragjyotishpur is found mentioned in the Ramayana also. Sualkuchi is a renowned village Of Assam. Another village like self-made progressive village of Sualkuchi will not be easily found in Assam. During the reign of King Dharma Pal this village was not known as Sualkuchi. Ancient scriptures mention that it was known as Sialkunchi during those times. The mention of weaving of Pat and Muga cloths for royal wardrobe is found in Madhya Dasam of Ananta Kondoli. The mention of Tanti caste of weavers is found in
Asom Buronji also says that this Tanti caste was made to settle at south of Sualkuchi. This data shows the importance bestowed on Tanti caste. These weavers also made pat and Muga apparels for the Badshah of Delhi along with the Ahom royalties. Hence the honour showered on this class of weaver from Sualkuchi were worth it because only they could manufacture Pat and Muga clothes that were suitable for the royal wardrobe. Till a few years ago every Assamese woman knew the art of weaving and wove clothes for self and the family. In Sualkuchi not only women knows to weave but men are equally adept in this art. Here weaving is not confined to any class of the society. This art has engrossed each and everyone and this helps to collaborate each other in their work.

2.5 Ancient trade relation of Sualkuchi through Brahmaputra

Lakshminath Bezbarua one of the greatest littérature of Assam has written in his biography "Mor Jibon Suaoron " how his entire family had to board a boat from Sualkuchi to go to Sibsagar from Guwahati and this mode of communication was available from Sualkuchi only. During those time ship, bus or train were not available at Assam, only big boats used for commercial purpose were present. Those boats were backbone of the Sualkuchi traders to communicate with the rest of Assam. Hence in Sualkuchi a class of professionals was found whose works were only to build varieties of boats as required by the traders or merchants. The boat builders brought necessary wooden planks from Upper Assam or use big trees that
occasionally came down by the river. In the book “Lachit Borphukan”, Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan wrote that during the battle of Saraighat, if Ramsingha would have been aware, he could have increased the strength of his fleet, as just near to Hajo two famous boat building yards were available – one at Ramdia and the other at Sualkuchi. About three decades back on the beach of Brahmaputra beside Kamrup were seen full with small and big boats from Sualkuchi. Especially traders of various places of Assam brought goods to supply to mill owners at Guwahati. Similarly goods, cloths materials were purchased and taken to other places. The then inhabitants of Guwahati were very attached to the folk songs (Borgeet) that were sung by these boatmen during evening or morning time by the river beach. Even today the septuagenarians fondly remember how they were mesmerized by the Vaishnavite songs that flowed from the midst of the Brahmaputra.

Trade and commerce were practiced through the mighty river to places like Majuli, Lakhimpur, Darrang and Nowgoan and brought down goods like mustard, rice, pulses etc to Sualkuchi village. About six months of every year the traders and merchants of Sualkuchi spend on different parts of Assam. With the passage of time mode of transportation became faster by bus or train, therefore trading by boat almost became extinct. Today’s Sualkuchi is no longer dependent on boats or ferries. The people whose occupation were only boat building got engaged in different jobs. Now, to retain the memory of the indispensable service given by the boats, rowing competition popularly known as ‘Nao Khel’ (boating race) is organized during the birth anniversary
of Shrimanta Shankerdeva. This competition attracts lakhs of people every year to Sualkuchi.

Sualkuchi is also abode of many ancient temples. A lot of pilgrims still visit the Bhringeswar temple located at North-West of the village. The hillock where the temple is located is called Lankesh. Presently people call it Ravan – roi. The location to the east of it is Borah hill. Many ancient temples were again reconstructed from their ruins by the Ahom kings. The Haigriv Madhab Temple located at Hajo is an example which was almost in ruins had it not been reconstructed by the Ahom kings. Hajo was earlier known as Manikutgram. It has come to notice that area near the river at Sualkuchi is thickly populated. The reason behind it is said that when large part of the village got drowned in to the river people were bound to move to other places. But knowing the prospects of growth of Sualkuchi economy people did not go far but settled to the North and South of the former village area. The present Sualkuchi grew up from the area occupied by these inhabitants. The remains of the original Sualkuchi are only the roadway by the river and the area near it. It has come to be known from the aged people of the village that places called Tantipara, Kamalabari, and Uria were present also in original Sualkuchi that were all drowned by the river. The western part of the village is still known as Tantipara. The possible conclusion that can be drawn is that inhabitants of original Tantipara settled in this area. According to Dr. Maheswar Neog, Sualkuchi village at one point of time was known as
Bongonagar. In the year 1613 Koch King Parikshit Narayan was defeated and Kamrup was taken over by the Moghuls. During that time the Taluk of Mojali, Faujdar Mirzanathan settled at Sualkuchi along with chief of navy Satrajit Rai. As the moghuls inhabited the village it came to be addressed as Bongonagar. It was during the reign of Ahom King Pratap Singha, Momai Tamuli Borbarua tried to make it an ideal village. The Ahom King put forward many reforms and policies for the welfare of the village. The Bassotoria Brahmins of Sualkuchi were brought over from Kenai by King Dharmapal of Pal dynasty. The Assam Buranji written by Holiram Dhekial Phukan also let us know that the Bassotoria Brahmins came to Sualkuchi during the reign of Pal dynasty. In the same era Emperor Ashoka tried to spread the message of Buddhism all over the world. He also sent ambassadors to Shri Lanka, China, Japan, and Korea to spread Buddhism. In the process nearby states like Kamrup also felt the wave of Buddhism. Lord Buddha's birthplace Kapilavastu lies to the South of Nepal Kingdom. From 'Allahabad Pillar' it has come to be known that boundary of ancient Kamrup was quite near to Nepal and Kapilavastu was situated in South of Nepal. Hence Buddhism could spread easily towards Kamrup.

Historian Kanaklal Barua has mentioned in his book 'History Of Kamrup' that "evidently the influence of Buddhism was felt in Kamrup long
before Bhaskarvarman came to occupy the throne."65 As per Rajatarangini, in the fifth century the father of Princess Amrit Prava was the king of Kamrup and his religious leaders were all Tibetans.66 This also shows that ancient Kamrup had a very cordial relation with Tibet. Based on certain studies made by scholars of Tibet on ancient Kamrup, Historian L.W. Shakespeare had learnt that Tibetans and Bhootanies believe that Buddha died in Kamrup, while the Hungarian traveler Csomode Koros claims that the Saint died in Gauhati under a pair of Sal tree.67 In spite of ancient Kamrup having huge influence of Buddhism no trace of it was found at Sualkuchi. Still, certain festivals are organized at Siddheswar Temple on the occasion of Buddha Purnima.

When the Moghuls left Assam after being defeated by the Ahoms, along with arms and ammunitions they also left behind many cloths that were specially woven for the Moghul King. The then Borphukan of Kamrup knowing the values of these cloths, kept them for himself instead of returning to the king. When the Ahom king came to know about it, Lammakhru Borphukan was sentenced to death.67 This instance provides a glorious example that the handloom industry and the products woven at Sualkuchi were priceless since a very long time. It can be defined with pride that the weavers from Sualkuchi could gather so much of attention and respect from the Moghul king and queen because of their unique works. Back in Kamrup, the Ahom king did not appreciate the idea of making people of Tanti caste settle elsewhere, because he did not want the learning of Muga and Pat weaving to be known outside

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Assam. It was another reason why the Borphukan was awarded with death sentence and Momai Tamuli Barbarua was imprisoned as they were very eager to spread the knowledge of Pat Muga weaving culture outside Assam.\textsuperscript{68} The Ahom Kings had major contribution towards the development handloom industry at Sualkuchi. The Ahom kings always gifted with pride, clothes woven out of Pat or Muga to eminent guests. The Muga clothes though woven at Sualkuchi were not meant for the people of Assam only. This unique product was also utilised to earn foreign currency or exchanged in kind.

In the year 1516 the Mohammedans made camp at Sualkuchi after attacking the kingdom of Parikshit Narayan.\textsuperscript{69} Later, they were defeated by the Ahoms and they had to leave Sualkuchi leaving all ammunitions, fleet and properties. Historians say that the Ahom soldiers found many arms, boats and also treasures in the campus of the Mohammedans. Since ancient time, to date of twenty first century, the handloom industry with its glory intact in the soil of Sualkuchi is still fluttering its flag of progress. The economy of Sualkuchi is primarily dependent on the handloom industry. The weaving and weavers of Sualkuchi are famous all over Assam and even in international level it has gained a good status. A huge gap of difference is seen when a comparison is made between the progress in trade made by Sualkuchi and other villages of Assam. If Assam had had ten more villages like Sualkuchi then its economic scenario would have been quite different. With the advent of new technology and trends and to carry forward the handloom industry to a new level, a detail analysis is required to understand what can be done. In
spite of development made by the handloom industry at Sualkuchi, the industry still faces many constraints. The industries other than handloom are now almost extinct and artisans belonging to other crafts have taken up silk weaving as profession; even the fishermen of Kaibartapara hamlet of Bamun Sualkuchi and Brahmin families have given up their respective caste occupation and taken up silk weaving as the main source of income. The weavers of Sualkuchi were not from the beginning very well developed in weaving of silk clothes. But they were quite adept in weaving of cotton clothes.

Prior to the British taking up the reign of Assam from the Ahom kings, an economic survey of that period showed that products exported from Assam helped to earn Rs 1,30,900 for the royal treasury. Out of these Muga yarn and clothes alone earned Rs 29,850. The survey report showed that by exporting Muga yarn of 65 Mon (1 Mon=40kg), the earning was Rs.11350; Muga clothes of 75 Mon, the earning was Rs.17,500. The Kamrup Buronji claims that after the Moghuls the Borphukan of Guwahati took about 610 Tanti families from Sualkuchi to be settled at Gauhati. After the Moghuls, the Ahoms came to power again; the state of ancient Kamrup witnessed many ups and downs but the respect that Sualkuchi has had earned for its handloom industry remained same. When the British took over from Assam, they found that only handloom industry of Sualkuchi could goad Assam towards economic development. In the year 1826, David Scott the then
Governor General of Assam found that Muga a very durable and break resistant yarn was already world famous yarn. He foresighted that out of exportable items, the Muga yarn would capture both Asian and European markets. "He considered that Muga silk was likely to become the most important article of export of Assam for Asiatic consumption and with reference to its well known superior strength and durability." He also suggested that to develop the handloom industry the following should be done:

1. Mulberry trees should be cultivated to rear Muga cocoons.
2. Standardization of Muga cutting machineries.
3. To ensure that consumption of Muga yarn grows rapidly a centre should be opened at Gauhati.

Knowing how the Muga yarn would bring drastic development to Assam's economic scenario David Scott in the year 1930 recommended to start Muga cultivation initially on ten thousand acres of land. He said that "Unless some such measure as that be recommended be sanctioned we can have nothing to expect in Assam." It has come to light that when weavers or other people from Sualkuchi went to procure Polu worms from the Garo hills, a very congenial relation was developed with the inhabitants of the Garo hills and it was they who used to buy the Garo Bhuni from the weavers of Sualkuchi. In this way weaving began to take up a commercial phase. The other items woven along were "Dhara" and "Jeng Sem".
2.6 The present century handloom industry at Sualkuchi

The handloom industry of Sualkuchi entered the twenty first century as a survivor and not as a fierce competitor. Its fortune has been fluctuating with that of the handloom industry in India in general. It has been since the nineteenth century the indigenous handloom products are facing competition from imported mill made cloths. During the first half of the twentieth century various economic, political and social influences of a rather unfavourable kind came into operation. Under these influences, the Indian mills made rapid progress, whereas the handlooms were left behind and continued in a stationary condition. Prior to second world war and during the British rule the conditions of weavers not only in Assam but all over India were precarious. Despite such situations, the weavers maintained their integrity and worked on to carry forward the handloom industry. If analyzed now, it can be pointed that the hardships of pre-independence period made the weavers understand that it was their contributions that made looms increase in every households and the handloom industry took a major turn as it shifted to factory work culture from being a household occupation only. However, post-war period saw the Indian handloom industry as more dependent on government assistance.

In Sualkuchi, the Pit loom and the Throw shuttle Frame loom had replaced the Loin loom in the process of technological improvement brought by empiricism. All over India, it was after the coming of East India Company who helped spreading the use of improved looms. The Jaquared and the Dobby machines used for flowering and designing are also contribution of the
British into the Indian weaving culture. Amidst times like discouraging weaving in India, there were also several improvements made on the fly-shuttle loom. During the time of struggle for independence in India, in Bengal semi-automatic loom was introduced. It is still used widely in West Bengal, Bangla Desh and in Assam also the immigrant Bengali weavers use it. After this change, for more than half a century no attempt was made to bring about technological innovation. It is only the simple fly shuttle loom that is widely used in Sualkuchi and all over Assam. Semi automatic looms are not yet fully accepted by the weavers of Assam.

In the year 2000, during the period of Ninth Five Year Plan, to encourage production of Muga cocoons on commercial basis together with meeting demands of Muga yarn in the global market, 'Golden Yarn Projec' was sketched out by the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India. This project was started to mark the fiftieth anniversary of 'Village Self-employment Scheme', which was to be continued till the target was achieved. This project has been implemented in five districts of Assam namely Kamrup, Cachar, Lakhimpur, Morigaon and Tinsukia, as these districts met the necessary criteria as per the plan. This project was allocated a budget of Rs.3.8 crore. This project has failed miserably in the district of lakhimpur in upper Assam. In lakhimpur, forty-seven self-help groups were formed as part of the project to fulfill the objectives and these are equally suffering. These self-help groups purchased machineries costing around Rs.4.28 lakhs but
after operating for a few months technical faults started frequently. Similarly the weavers at Sualkuchi under self-help groups for the project are facing similar problems.

2.7 Employment and income generation by the handloom Industry of Sualkuchi

The employment generated by the looms at Sualkuchi proves the importance of traditional handlooms in the rural areas. It is seen that a large number of educated youths remain unemployed in the hope of getting a government job. This problem is acute in rural areas. If these youths look for opportunity they can very well find in handlooms, which provide avenues for self and employment as well as wage employment. As per a survey report of Dr. P. Baishya, in the year 2000, the active looms at Sualkuchi cluster have provided employment to 13,827 hired weavers out of which 10,496 are female weavers coming from distant villages of the state. The handloom, being a labour intensive traditional industry, has provided direct employment to 21,250 weavers and 8,917 helpers at Sualkuchi cluster. If different units related to weaving is taken into consideration than the number of persons employed comes to approximately 36,000 persons. There are also a large number of hawkers/peddlers buying and selling cloths locally and in different parts of the state.

Regarding income, it is directly proportional to the regularity and labour of the weaver. The income increases with production, which benefits both
weaver and entrepreneur. Let us see from the data collected from field survey. The income of the entrepreneur is dependent on the margin over the cost of production; weaver is dependent on wage rates for designs woven and the length of the fabric woven. A dress (Chador Mekhela) of Mulberry yarn, that is lighter in design, consumes raw materials worth Rs.470/-. Wages for two weavers range from Rs.450/- to 500/-. To the wage of the weaver, an amount equivalent to the wage paid (say Rs.450/-) is added for fixing the ex-factory price with a view to cover some expenditures like cost of sizing the yarn, bobbin and pirn winding, paying the electricity bill, rent of the workshop and daily snacks. Therefore, the ex-factory price of a dress is almost Rs.1,370/-. In a month two looms weave about six pairs of dress. Hence, two weavers would earn Rs.1,350/- to Rs.1,400/-, whereas the owner/entrepreneur earns Rs.2,500/- to Rs.2,600/-. Therefore, in ten months (two months are excluded taking into consideration festivals, holidays and absenteeism) the average earning for weavers is about Rs.13,000/- Rs.13,200/- and owner/entrepreneur earns Rs.24,000/- to Rs.24,200/-. It is to be mentioned here that the income helps the weaver to remain far above the poverty line but after reciprocating to all needs at toady's exorbitant rate, they are unable to maintain a standard livelihood.

During the study it has been found that the co-operative societies of Sualkuchi sell a cotton 'chador' at a standard rate. Whereas the same 'chador', is sold by weavers who are not organized, most of the time at a lower rate, which they do not want to divulge openly. Often, it is a tacit agreement between the weaver and the middlemen. However, during the interview process it has been estimated that they sell somewhere between the
price of Rs.200/- to Rs.400/- from plain chador to simple designed respectively. Table No.2.01 displays varieties of cotton chador sold at different price rates by weaver of a co-operative society.

Table 2.01 Selling Price of Chador by weavers under Co-operative Fold

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Chador</th>
<th>Selling Price (RS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plain chador (Synthetic yarn mix)</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plain pure cotton chador</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure cotton chador with coloured border</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple designed cotton chador</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the table no.2.01 we find that the average selling rate of plain and simple designed cotton chador by the weaver of co-operative society is Rs.470.00/-. Therefore, our estimated average selling rate of plain and simple designed cotton chador by weavers who are not under the co-operative fold which is between Rs.287.00/- to Rs.320/- is much lower than the average selling rate of the same by weaver of co-operative society.

The price difference observed between weavers of organized sector and that of unorganized sector is an open big different. Still many independent weavers are unwilling to register under Co-operative Societies due to reasons like mandatory submission of yearly audited books of accounts; tax returns and procedural hassles of closer of society registration with the Registrar of
Societies, Govt. of Assam. The Z test for proportions may be applied here to examine if there is significant difference between weavers belonging to the co-operative sectors and weavers who are independent, from the following data:

In a simple random sample of 600 people taken from Sualkuchi village 400 were registered weavers. In another simple random sample of 800 people 450 were independent weavers. Let the null hypothesis be that there is no significant difference between weavers under registered societies and those who are not registered.

\( H_0 : \) there is no significant difference between weavers under registered societies and those who are not registered.

\[
S.E (p_1 - p_2) = \sqrt{pq \left( \frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2} \right)}
\]

where, \( p_1 = \frac{400}{600} = 0.667 \)

\( p_2 = \frac{450}{800} = 0.562 \)

\[
p = \frac{x_1 + x_2}{n_1 + n_2}, q = 1 - p
\]

\( n_1 = 600, n_2 = 800, x_1 = 400, x_2 = 450 \)

\( p = \frac{400 + 450}{1450} = \frac{17}{28} \)

\( q = 1 - \frac{17}{28} = \frac{11}{28} \)

\[
S.E (p_1 - p_2) = \sqrt{\frac{17}{28} \times \frac{11}{28} \left( \frac{1}{600} + \frac{1}{800} \right)}
\]
Under $H_0$, the test statistic is

$$Z = \frac{P_1 - P_2}{\text{S.E.}(P_1 - P_2)} = \frac{0.667 - 0.562}{0.0263} = \frac{0.105}{0.0263} = 3.992$$

Since the calculated value of $Z$ is more than 2.58 at 1% level of significance the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence we may conclude that there is significant difference between registered weavers and independent weavers at Sualkuchi.

Note:

$n$ = size of sample

$p_1$ = % of co-operative weavers in the village

$p_2$ = % of independent weavers in the village

$q = (1 - p)$ i.e. probability of failure

$x_1$ & $x_2$ stand for the number of occurrence in the two samples of sizes $n_1$ and $n_2$ respectively.

2.8 Problems of weavers at Sualkuchi

About ninety percent of the population of Sualkuchi village are directly or indirectly dependent on the handloom industry. Out of these, ten percent do not possess their own loom. The general class of people do not have the necessary capital that is required for purchasing a complete set of loom and accessories. Hence, many weavers are working under master weavers and co-operative societies. Besides, high cost of yarn, especially Muga yarn, is another problem. To eliminate the constraints of handloom weaving increasing Muga production is very essential. Along with it, monopoly of Mulberry yarn supply by private traders should be stopped and supply of yarn through corporation should be encouraged. The Central Silk Board, under
Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, should look aggressively for importing varieties of silk yarn and in the process generate a relationship with other countries for trade and commerce. Muga cocoons are reared still in ancient methods in Assam. Scientific technology should be implemented to increase Muga production. Demand for Muga products are always on the rise and so more Muga farms should be established. The progress that Sualkuchi should have had in the sphere of handloom industry has not happened. The practice of handloom weaving is quite old at Sualkuchi, but quality and designs have not been upgraded. The technology involved in weaving has not seen any change over either. The weavers do not have any technical background to increase the methods of colouring, dyeing and designing on fabrics. In spite of being reputed for handloom weaving, Sualkuchi does not have its own dyeing and calendaring machineries.

Human beings always take interest in something new and innovative. So the weavers of Sualkuchi should refrain from remaining confined to only weaving Muga and Mulberry fabrics. They should also take up blending of fabrics to increase the market share. The weavers' co-operative societies and Apex body need to look for opening more avenues outside Assam to display and sale handloom products of Sualkuchi.
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