



## **Problems of Handloom Weavers in Assam: A Case Study of Kamrup District, Assam**

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### **Abstract**

The handloom sector plays an important role in our economy not only providing employment or generating income, but also the handloom products have its own identity of different state or region by its unique design. The changing fashion trends could not fade the glory of handloom products of our country. But the sector is facing several problems such as low income, low educated people, low creditability etc. But the future growth in the handloom sector could be achieved through a series of strategic policies in the major constraint areas and could make the sector more vibrant. Here, an attempt has been made to analyse the economic status of handloom weavers along with different personal and social problems faced by the handloom weavers in Kamrup district of Assam.

**Key Words:** Handloom Weavers, Personal Problems, Socio Cultural Problems, Economic Status, Women empowerment

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### **1. Introduction**

Handloom weaving occupies a pivotal place in the socio-economic fabric of Assamese society. This age-old household craft has brought a sense of pride, dignity and social status among the weavers (Bori & Bhattacharyya, 2021). Being more labour-intensive, the handloom weaving sector in Assam provides employment to 1,59,577 full time weavers and 8,90,612 part time weavers during 2021-22 (Economic Survey Assam, 2022-23). Out of the total handloom households of India, Assam represents around 40.37 percent of total weavers and women weavers comprise 53.89 percent out of the total women weavers of India (Fourth Handloom Census of India 2019-20). Therefore, empowering women in the handloom sector would likely build livelihood development and cushion their financial management through employment (Goswami, 2005) and any government initiative to develop handloom sector directly intensify the empowerment of women in the state. It was reported in a study that participation of nearly 89% of women weavers in the self-help group not only increased their monthly income and production in handloom products but also improved their standard of living (Baishya, 2019).

Weavers, in Assam are mainly from the vulnerable and weaker sections of the society, who weave for their household needs and contribute to the production. Therefore, handloom weaving as an activity is in crisis with low productivity, low wages, low literacy levels,

firmly entrenched middlemen and very little formal bank finance flowing to the sector (BIRD, 2016). Educated youth are still undiscovered in this sector. Most of the weavers (23.5%) were never attended school, whereas a meagre (3.6%) of them holding graduate and above degree (Fourth Handloom Census of India 2019-20). Therefore, literacy levels of weavers must be improved through adult education programmes and special education programmes and they should be made aware of the schemes targeted for the weaving community (Kalita, 2019).

Handloom sector is providing employment next to agriculture in India. But the generation of income of the weavers in this sector is totally disappointing. The Fourth All India Handloom Census disclosed that 67% weavers were earning monthly less than Rs. 5,000 from their weaving activities, only 26.2% were earning in between Rs. 5,000 to 10,000, whereas only 6.8% were earning above Rs. 10,000. We can easily envisage that if this would be their only source of income, what would be the standard of living of their families.

In Assam also, the picture is quite similar. Most of the weavers continue to make traditional designs without any change to a limited product range. There are no innovation and few opportunities to develop entrepreneurship skills. Therefore, most of them are living in a very pitiful condition. Though they are found to work round of the year in their looms, but they have witness little improvement in their life style or in scale of productivity.

## **2. Objectives**

This study aims to analyse and evaluate the problems of the handloom weavers in the state of Assam and therefore the following specific objectives are fixed:

- i) To analyse the economic profile of handloom weavers in the district
- ii) To study the personal and economic problems encountered by the handloom weavers.

## **3. Research Methodology**

The study was based on both primary and secondary data. We used stratified random sampling method to collect data from the respondents. Rampur, one among the 14 blocks of Kamrup district of Assam has 63 villages and there is total 20,150 families in this Block (Census of India, 2011). There are 10 gaon panchayat in Rampur Development Block and from each gaon panchayat two villages were selected. And thereby 10 weavers from each 20 villages were selected randomly for the survey. Data regarding their personal and business profiles from 200 weavers were collected by survey method using scheduled questionnaires and direct interviews. For this, a well-designed and pre-tested questionnaire schedule was prepared.

And secondary data were collected from the offices of the Handloom and Textiles, Assam and reports of Government of Assam. Supporting data were also collected from published and unpublished sources like reports, books, journals, periodicals. Suitable and appropriate statistical tools were used while tabulating, analysing and interpreting the data.

Economic status of any business unit basically depends upon the working capital, no of employee, sales activity and working environment of the unit. Here, to measure the economic status of the weavers, we use the variables-types of dwelling units, ownership of dwelling unit, possession of looms and level of income.

To evaluate the problems of weavers, we use weighted ranking methods to rank the personal and economic problems faced by them in starting and continuing their weaving activities.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1. Economic Profile of Handloom Weavers

###### 4.1.1. Type of Dwelling Units

Household handloom units are defined as households where one or more members are engaged in handloom related activities (weaving, preparatory and post-loom activities) in the last one year with or without complete looms in their premises (within or outside the house) (Fourth Handloom Census, 2019-20). Here, in the study area, 76% of the weaver households live in kuccha homes, while only 24% live in pucca structures which is very much similar how Indian housing pattern is distributed in general in rural area.

**Table 4.1.1: Number of handloom weavers households by type of dwelling unit**

Types of Dwelling Unit	No of weaver	Total (%)
Kuchha	152	76.0
Pucca	48	24.0
Total	200	100

Source: Survey Data

###### 4.1.2. Ownership of Dwelling Units

Ownership of dwelling units of weaving households are depicted in table 4.1.2 where it was observed that majority (94%) of handloom weavers were living in their own house, whereas very few of them (6%) were in either rented or other dwelling units. Handloom weavers prefer to work in their homes. Therefore, improvement of work place is an important infrastructure support for the weavers. Improved dwelling unit-cum-work shed provides better work environment, more space, sufficient power supply, improves working hours. Again, uninterrupted power supply enables installation of improved looms.

**Table 4.1.2: Number of handloom weavers households by ownership of dwelling unit**

Ownership of Dwelling Unit	No of weaver	Total (%)
Owned	188	94.0
Rented	9	4.5
Others	3	1.5
Total	200	100

Source: Survey Data

###### 4.1.3. Possession of Looms

Whether the weavers have their own loom or they are hired weaver that very much determine their financial capabilities. Here, in this study, majority of weavers possessed their own loom (refer table 4.1.3). As far as ownership is concerned, 79.5% looms were owned by the unit/proprietor concerned. whereas 20.5% weavers were without loom (hired weavers).

**Table 4.1.3: : Number of handloom weavers households by possession of looms**

Possession of Looms	No of weaver	Total (%)
With Loom	159	79.5

Without Loom	41	20.5
Total	200	100

Source: Survey Data

#### 4.1.4. Level of Income

According to Fourth All India Handloom Census (2019-20), a significant share of weaver households continues to earn less than Rs.5,000 in a month. Relatively low return from the sector is perhaps the key determinant behind the fall in average number of weavers per household between the two censuses, from 1.28 in the Third census (2009-10) to 1.05 in the fourth census (2019-20).

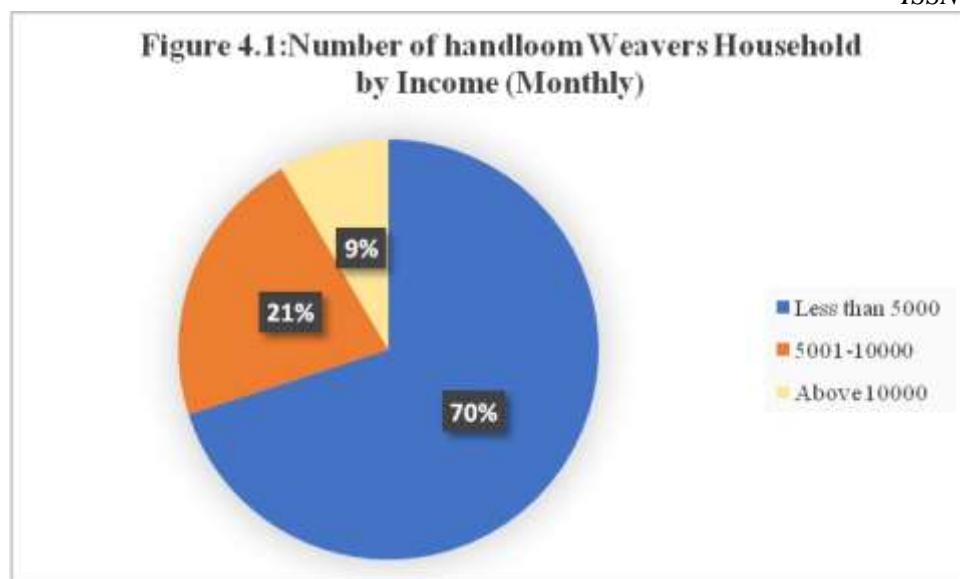
Here, table 4.1.4 shows the monthly income of handloom weavers' household in the study area.

**Table 4.1.4: Number of Handloom Weavers Household by Income (Monthly)**

By Income	No of weaver	Total (%)
Less than 5000	140	70.0
5001-10000	43	21.5
10001-15000	9	4.5
15001-20000	4	2.0
20001-25000	3	1.5
25001-30000	0	0
30,001-35,000	1	0.5
Above 35,000	0	0
Total	200	100

Source: Survey Data

Data above reveals that majority (70%) of the weaver households earned less than Rs.5,000/- in a month, only 21.5% were earning Rs. 5,000-10,000 and just 8.5% had a monthly income in excess of Rs.10,000., which is shown in Figure 4.1. This might create a situation that the handloom weaver families to move away from this profession to others.



#### 4.1.5. Banking Services

Banking habit of handloom weavers was not satisfactory as only 27.3% had a bank account of their own. But it is worth mentioning here that some of the weavers having bank account reported that they seldom did monetary transactions. They opened their account only for the check of transaction of money ever received from government schemes.

#### 4.1.6. Debt Status

Flow of capital to the handloom sector is closely related to the working capital management of the handloom business and to the overall health and business performance of the sector. But still, we must acknowledge that credit is a necessary but not the only input for the development of the industry. Here, only about 2.4% of the weaver households carried any kind of debt/loan from bank/micro finance institution.

### 4.2. Problems of Handloom Weavers

In the present study, we have examined different barriers faced by handloom weavers. These barriers are the byproducts of the perception of people around them, different psychological and institutional constraints existing in the society. We have identified and analyzed the followings problems faced by handloom weavers:

- i) Personal problems;
- ii) Economic Problems

#### 4.2.1. Personal Problem

Here, in this study, different personal problems that might have been faced by the handloom weavers were mentioned in the questionnaire and they were asked to rank them according to severity of the problems. Eleven personal problems mentioned in the questionnaire were lack of confidence, self-imposed restriction, ignorance about schemes, fear of failure, poor self-image, lack of capital, restricted mobility, low level of aspiration,

unsupportive family, low level of education and unbalanced outlook. Of these stated problems, first three ranks awarded by the handloom weavers were selected for analysis. As it can be observed from Table 4.2.1 that the weavers marked to the problem of ‘ignorance about schemes’ as first rank, ‘lack of capital’ as second rank and ‘restricted mobility’ as third rank. We used weighted ranking method for ranking of problems by the handloom weavers. The problems marked by the handloom weavers were ranked by weighted score as follows: three points were assigned as weights to the problem ranked first, two points to the problem ranked second and one point to the problem ranked third. Based on total weighted score for each problem, ranking was done. In order to estimate weighted score, we had to first count number of weavers who had assigned the specific problem under each rank. Then for each problem we had to multiply weight with the corresponding number of weavers who had assigned a specific rank against each weight and then repeated the same for all the ranks and summed them up to get weighted score. Weighted scores were then arranged in ascending order along with the type of problem to assign the ranks to the problems. From the table its clear which problem is awarded what rank that does not need any elaboration.

**Table 4.2.1: Ranking of Personal Problems by Handloom Weavers**

Weights		3	2	1	Weighted Score	Rank
Ranks		I	II	III		
No. of Handloom Weavers ranking Problems	Ignorance about schemes	60	42	37	301	1
	Lack of Capital	50	34	35	253	2
	Restricted mobility	16	42	30	162	3
	Lack of confidence	10	15	36	96	4
	Low level of education	15	15	13	88	5
	Self-imposed restriction	12	14	15	79	6
	Poor self-image	5	13	11	52	7
	Fear of failure	10	7	7	51	8
	Low level of aspiration	7	10	8	49	9
	Unbalance outlook	10	6	3	45	10
	Unsupportive family	5	2	5	24	11
ALL	200	200	200	1200	-	

Source: Survey data

#### 4.2.2. Economic Problems

The economic problems are the problems that relate to institutional, financial and organisational problems arise in running a business. Here, in this study, different economic problems that might have been faced by the handloom weavers were mentioned in the questionnaire and the weavers were asked to rank them according to degree of acuteness of the problems. The economic problems that mentioned in the questionnaire were Low economic creditability, Rising input price, Poor infrastructure, Labour shortage, Marketing, Scarcity of raw materials, Competition with power loom product, Lack of policy support, Unorganised nature of industry, Exploitation by intermediaries. Of these, first three ranks identified by the handloom weavers were selected for analysis. Table 4.2.1 shows the

responses of rankings of the economic problems faced by handloom weavers. The problems identified by them were ranked by weighted score as follows: three points were assigned to the problem ranked first, two points to the problem ranked second and one point to the problem ranked third. Based on total weighted score for each problem, ranking was done. It can be observed from table, that the weavers identified the problem of ‘low economic credibility’ assigned to it as first rank, to ‘rising input price’ as second rank and to ‘poor infrastructure’ as the third rank.

**Table 4.2.2: Ranking of Sociocultural Problems by Handloom Weavers**

Weights		3	2	1	Weighted Score	Rank
Ranks		I	II	III		
No of Handloom Weavers ranking Problems	Low economic credibility	71	40	37	330	1
	Rising input price	50	42	45	279	2
	Poor infrastructure	43	46	33	254	3
	Labour shortage	12	18	33	105	4
	Marketing	12	17	13	83	5
	Scarcity of raw materials	4	15	15	57	6
	Competition with power loom product	4	18	5	53	7
	Lack of policy support	3	2	12	25	8
	Unorganised nature of industry	1	1	4	9	9
	Exploitation by intermediaries	0	1	3	5	10
ALL	200	200	200	1200	-	

Source: Survey data

## 5. Policy Implications

- i) Weavers must be oriented some exposure programme for betterment of their skills, knowledge and technology in order to ensure quality of product and enhanced scale of productivity.
- ii) Awareness needs to be generated about marketing of their product such as e-commerce. They can be trained for online marketing and encouraged for selling through online portals.
- iii) Government should take initiative in promoting exports which have a miniscule share at this moment.
- iv) The educational status of handloom workers needs to be improved so that they are more aware about government schemes, marketing channels and the importance of collectivisation and could bring innovation in their product and in marketing strategies.
- v) Proper and hassle-free arrangements of finance for the weavers to enhance their production is a vital part in promoting this sector.

- vi) Government investment in capacity building is necessary for those weaver societies which have been found viable or potentially viable.

Therefore, to cut out or minimise the bottlenecks in handloom weaving sector, it is utmost necessary for the state to purveying infrastructure development, skill enhancement, availability of required credit to the stakeholders, proper marketing and sufficient supply of raw materials to the weavers. Proper government initiatives through financial assistance and implementation of various developmental and welfare schemes for the weavers will definitely make this sector more vibrant, attractive and ready to embrace new opportunities in coming days.

## **6. Conclusion**

Handloom weaving had its own place from the time immemorial and still it is captivating its place in this era of changing fashion. The sector continues to nurture and preserve ancient weaving skills which are unique to each state and region and provides employment to large number of rural households. This sector is characterised by households having low level of education, low levels income ridden with high inequalities and low credit penetration. About 76% of the weaver households still live in kuccha houses. Ignorance about schemes, Lack of Capital and Restricted mobility are major personal problem as stated by handloom weavers. Again, low economic credibility, rising input prices and poor infrastructure as the first three economic problems faced by them. Due to the lack of credit from banking institutions, weavers are forced into exploitative relationships with money-lenders, who give them credit on exorbitant terms and traders, who advance production credit, and use the leverage gained to suppress wages. Proper policy initiatives apart from government can minimise these problems. But it is equally important to educate the weavers to reap the maximum benefit from these schemes.

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