



Socio-economic and structural analysis of cottage industry workers : a case study from a remote area of Assam, India

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Abstract

Cottage industry, particularly handloom sector, one of the largest manufacturing sub-sectors of agrarian Assam, provides livelihood to a large section of rural population. In the predominantly agrarian economy plagued by under-industrialization, rising unemployment and a greatly reduced availability of land, weaving silk and handicraft production provide the main opportunity for the generation of additional income to a large section of the rural folk. Thus, these village industries, the most prominent and widespread of which is weaving, afford what seems to be the only scope for self-employment for many in rural folk in Assam. Indeed, handloom weaving plays a very vital role in the rural economy of Assam. The general aim of the present paper is to explore the social, economic and working conditions of the weavers of Sualkuchi in particular and the problems they are facing. The present work is based on empirical study. The study is based on primary data, collected through field survey by direct questionnaire to the respondents, during the 1st week of January, 2012. Simple percentage method, bar and wheel diagrams have been used to analyze the data. After an overall analysis it may be concluded that there are several problems that beset the workers like lack of capital and credit facilities, poor working conditions, non-availability of raw material, poor implementation of Govt. schemes etc.

Keywords : Cottage industry, handloom, silk-weaving, socio-economic problems.

1. Introduction

Our country, India has a large and well-developed cottage industry sector. Practically every state and region has its own special niche products made in this sector – be it Lucknow's famous chikan work or famous Pashmina shawls of Kashmir. The term 'industry' describes those activities in the secondary sector, and is particularly concerned with manufacturing (Knowles and Wareing, 2012). Cottage industry, particularly handloom is one of the largest manufacturing sub-sectors of rural Assam, providing livelihood to a large section of rural population. In this regard, the name of Sualkuchi of Assam deserves special mention.

Sualkuchi, the famous "Silk town" of Assam, occupies a unique place in the cultural history of the state for preserving the heritage of silk weaving in the State. Situated in the north bank of river Brahmaputra in Kamrup district, this town is famous

for its sarees and mekhala chadars woven from mulberry, tassar and muga silks. This is the abode of the Baishyas of Assam, whose primary occupation is silk processing and weaving from time immemorial (Begum, 2009). About 35 kms from Guwahati, Sualkuchi is a block of Kamrup District with a population of 70,962 (2011 census).

2. Objectives

Some of the objectives of this paper are :

- (i) to examine the nature of workforce engaged in cottage industry in Sualkuchi and to analyze their socio-economic profile,
- (ii) to examine their working and living conditions, and
- (iii) to highlight the problems faced by the workers and suggest remedial measures for their betterment based upon observation, and suggestion of the workers.

3. Methodology

The present work is based on empirical study. Respondents have been selected from different parts of the block. Sualkuchi block has a total of 43 villages, of which 3 villages were selected randomly for my study, one with a population between 500-1000 persons and the other two with population of above 1000, and covering a total of 108 sample households. The survey was carried out in the 1st week of January, 2012 and respondents were interviewed through the help of a questionnaire.

4. Results and Discussion

On the basis of the questionnaire and keeping in mind the various objectives of the study, I was

able to gather some relevant facts pertaining to my paper. Although originally, Sualkuchi was a 'craft village' having several cottage industries till the forties of the last century such as handloom weaving industry, oil processing, goldsmith, pottery etc. the industries other than handloom are now almost extinct and the artisans have already taken up silk weaving as a profession.

4.1 By classifying the workers and their family members into 6 main classes on the basis of age-groups, the dominant age group of working population is found to be 26-45 years. Although the children of the family also help their parents but they are involved in doing menial work like card-punching etc.

Table-1 : Age-wise Distribution of Population

Age-Group	Percentage
0-5	5.4
6-15	11.1
16-25	27.4
26-45	36.9
46-60	15.7
61& ABOVE	3.2
TOTAL	100

4.2 The study area also reveals a high percentage of literacy of the people which has greatly helped them to raise their standard of living in the society. It also indicates the growing

awareness and consciousness that exists among them. Of interest is the recent trend of young women with college degrees taking up weaving activity seriously as an occupation.

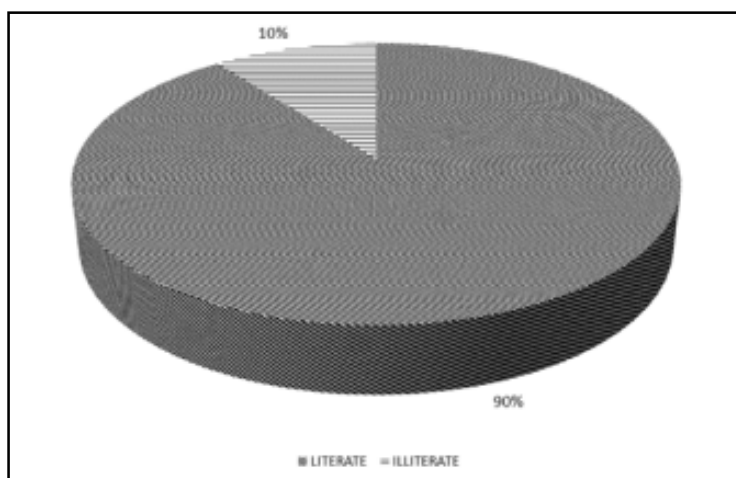


Fig. - 1 : Educational status of the workers

4.3 While 95 per cent of the households in the study area are non-migrants, just a mere 5 per cent are migrants. These migrant people have

come in search of work or after marriage from the neighbouring districts like Nalbari, Nagaon and North Lakhimpur districts of Assam.

Table-2 : Migratory Status

Status	Percentage
Migrated	5.55
Non-migrated	94.46
TOTAL	100

4.4 The workforce in Sualkuchi comprises of hired migratory young women, mostly from the Bodo dominated areas and from other districts of Assam, seeking wage-employment in Sualkuchi to earn a living.

Table - 3 : Workers working in the unit

Type	Percentage
Household workers	48.86
Hired workers	51.14
TOTAL	100

4.5 A working day typically begins at 8am and continues up to 10pm with breaks in between. However, during festival time the workers have to put in more hours in weaving.

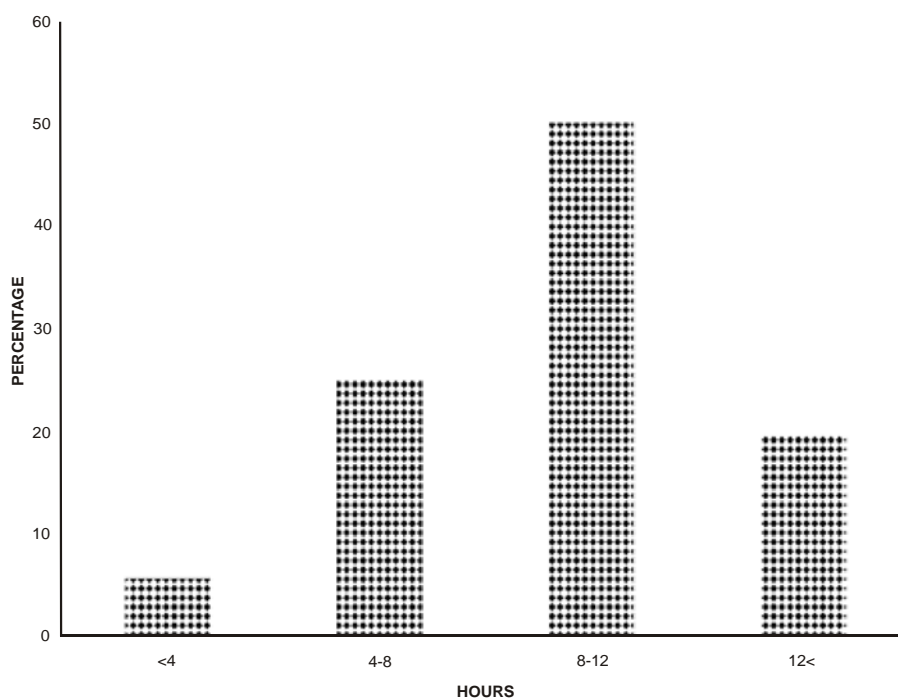


Fig. - 2 : Working Hours (Per day)

As regards their social and economic conditions, their plight is much better off. Variations in income level however, lead to variations in house-types. But with rising income levels and developed

means of transport and communication and hence, better availability of building materials, more and more people are building pucca houses to live in for themselves.

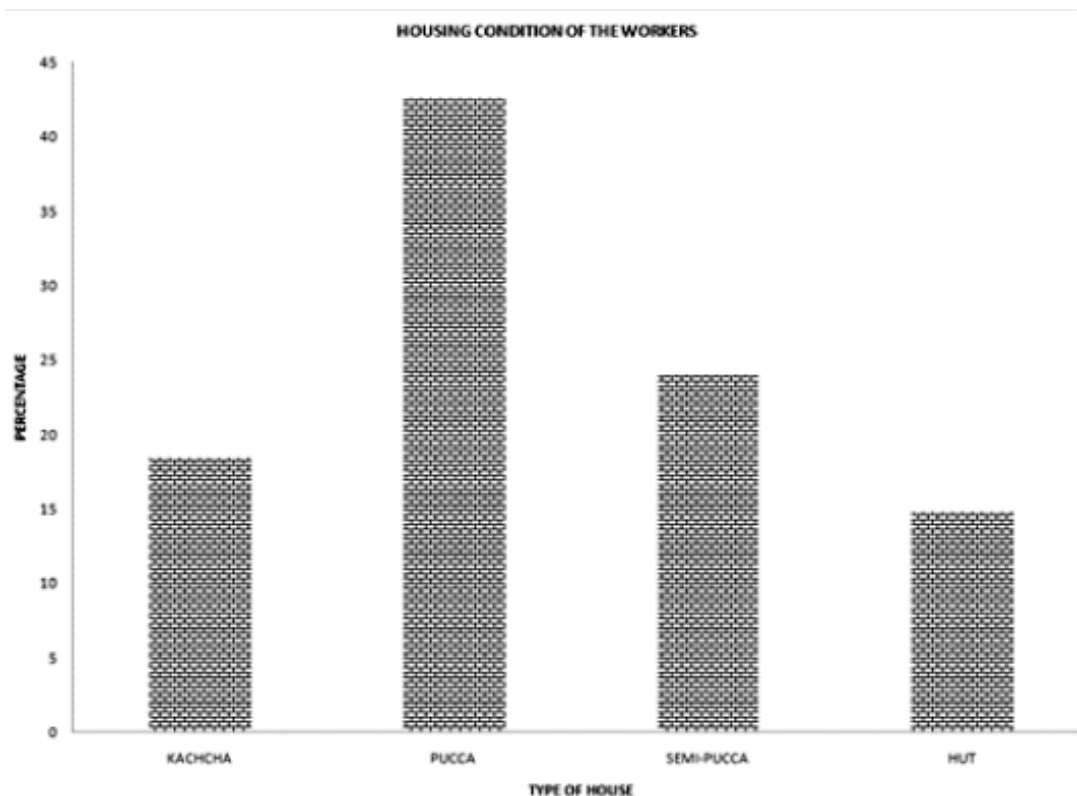


Fig. - 3 : Housing condition of the workers

4.6 The families have access to well constructed flush and manual service latrines.

Table-4 : Type of latrine facility

TYPE	PERCENTAGE
Flush	55.55
Manual Service	44.45
TOTAL	100

4.7 While some have access to electricity in the house, others use kerosene for the purpose of lighting their houses. There are frequent power-cuts which greatly retard weaving activity. Potable drinking water is the need of every human being. For it there are various sources

available to the people, either within or outside the premise like hand pumps, taps, wells etc. Better infrastructural facilities like cooker, sewing machine, iron, radio, tape, bicycle, T.V, fan, fridge, scooter, motorcycle, mobile etc. are also being used increasingly by the workers.

But the workers also suffer from minor as well as major illnesses like eye problems, backache, B. P problems, gall bladder stone, diabetes, asthma etc.

4.8 Despite comparatively better socio-economic conditions of Sualkuchi weavers than the weavers in the rest of the country, they too are struggling to overcome few problems that are hindrances in their living.

- Whatever the people of Sualkuchi are, are due to their own efforts. They have not received any form of major govt. support so far. Sometimes yarns were being made available at subsidized rates but it is beyond the reach of the poor weavers.
- Previously, dyeing, reeling, spinning etc. were other activities carried out by the people of Sualkuchi but today their work has been confined only to the weaving activity. Muga is not readily available. Artificial silk mostly tassar is now being used in the process of weaving.
- There is shortage of skilled and expert weavers, lack of finishing and processing facilities, efficient marketing facilities, modern designs, pricing and packaging.
- Besides this, the acute shortage of power is a major concern, which slackens production during the peak hours.
- The wages that the weavers get after toiling hard for the whole day is very low. This is because the weavers are unaware of the real value of their products in the International market.
- The weaving workforce in Sualkuchi is predominantly hired and migratory in nature.
- At present Sualkuchi silk is facing the most prominent threat from across the border in China with its superior and cheap products in mulberry and Chinese tassar which appears like muga.
- Above all, the govt. schemes are not properly implemented.

5. Recommendations

Sualkuchi, also known as 'Manchester of the East' is a heritage to the age-old cultural history of Assam. So it should be our endeavour to keep alive our handloom cottage industry.

- The Handloom and Textiles Department, Assam should take up necessary steps to organize workshops and seminars on co-operative education frequently to make the weaver member of co-operative societies aware and educate on cooperation.
- Special attention should be paid in implementing different Govt. sponsored schemes in real sense of the term. EXPOS and Trade fairs should be organized in different districts at least twice in a year so that the weavers get opportunities to sell their products.
- Proper training on weaving using well-developed looms, developed design, dying system should be imparted to the weavers.
- Apart from imparting training, the uses of Jacquard and Draw-boy loom should be given to the weavers of weaving cooperative societies.
- Other Government agencies like Assam Government Marketing Cooperation (A.G.M.C) and ARTFED should also take more helpful steps in marketing the products of weaving co-operative societies of Assam.
- It is necessary to inspire new generation to take weaving as a profession. The most important aspect, in my view, is to study the taste and preferences of the modern consumers and accordingly different dresses should be made.

6. Conclusion

Though almost all the Assamese people living in rural areas are well acquainted with the weaving job, the people of Sualkuchi are especially expert in this weaving culture. This weaving culture and the handlooms are kept alive by the people of Sualkuchi since long.

The word “Bowa-Kata” is inseparably related to the Assamese people. It was regarded as a very shameful matter for Assamese women if someone does not know how to weave in the past. It is a tradition of Assamese people offering Gamucha and Bihuan to the seniors and beloved respectively at the time of Bohag Bihu —the national festival of Assam

celebrated in the spring. Such customs remind us that the weaving is running in the blood of Assamese women from time immemorial. Assamese women have a reputation of earning livelihood by virtue of weaving for maintaining their families. Therefore it is sure that weaving has gained a great importance in the Assamese society since long.

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