

Fostering Women Empowerment through Handloom

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Abstract

Introduction: Handloom has a greater role to play towards local development and economic growth. Especially in rural parts of India, women are skilled with art of weaving. It has significance in culture and earning livelihood. Presently, handloom in India is facing downfall due to co – existence of power loom. Government through several schemes has extended their services in encouraging handloom items. These initiatives to some extent are contributing towards women empowerment and women entrepreneurship. However, these handful numbers of schemes are insufficient to provide comprehensive protection and recognition to the handloom weavers and dresses produced by them.

Objectives: The role played by the women entrepreneurs for eradication of poverty and industrial developments is discussed in this paper by analyzing the schemes presently implemented in Kokrajhar district. Also the applicability of international conventions concerning women empowerment and traditional knowledge are interpreted. The need for achieving women empowerment to attain Sustainable Development Goals, 2030 envisioned by United Nations Organization is dealt in this paper.

Methods: The author has conducted empirical and non – empirical study for this paper. The researcher has collected both primary and secondary sources of data. As far as primary sources of data are concerned, the author has collected data by conducting an interview on employees of Handloom department, Kokrajhar district of Bodoland Territorial Region. For the secondary sources text books, Bare Acts, internet documents, articles, research papers, international covenants, and thesis are referred.

Results: Handloom is facing competition from the power loom. The power loom industry produces more cheaply and more quickly. Because handloom items are more expensive, only a small portion of the population can afford to purchase them, whereas a much greater portion chooses fabrics from power looms. As a result of the modern textile industry's rapid technological advancement and automation, many high-quality synthetic and cotton textile products are now produced in large quantities, forcing power looms to compete fiercely with handlooms for market share. Lack of awareness among consumers in distinguishing the handloom and power loom products is another ground for the downfall of handloom. To extend support to the handloom weavers the local government recently has introduced new schemes in Kokrajhar district. Capacity Building Program using ICT tools and Technology to Enhance Livelihood of Weavers / Artisans of B.T.R, Swarnibhaari Naari Scheme and Handloom Mark Project are found to be the present active schemes in Kokrajhar district.

Conclusions: Women through handloom can become independent entrepreneurs and help eradicate poverty too. The need for intervention by the government to regularize schemes and enact effective legislations for the production of certain items only through handloom will be analyzed in this paper. A legislative law can ensure equity for prevailing of justice and achieve Sustainable Development Goals, (SDG) 2030, an agenda by United Nations Organization.

Keywords: Women empowerment, development, sustainable, entrepreneurship, handloom, weaving, schemes.

1. Introduction

The contribution of women in the household work and in other profession is remarkable since time immemorial in India. They are skilled with innumerable knowledge such as education, vocational activities, cultural affairs, social tasks, etc. (Vijayachandrika, 2022) Despite of these abilities some women feel under privileged and powerless. The weapon to give such women different perspectives is through empowering them for self-sustainability. (Debnath et al., 2020) Women who are suppressed with the ideology of male dominance of

patriarchal society or burdened with the family welfare objectives must be given different perspectives for the overall development with the help of empowerment point of view.(Rajesh, 2020)

1.1 Women Empowerment

Empowerment is a procedure in which an individual gains control over their lives to deal with any given circumstances. It is a concept that gives an individual strength to ascertain between righteousness and wrong. It gives strength to people to make a decision and enables them to fight for justice. Women empowerment also ensures equitable growth in the nation. (Vijayachandrika, 2022) Women empowerment facilitates capacities to participate in cultural, social, economic and political systems of the society. Empowerment will make the women channelize their skills for the self-sustainability and independent decision making. They need to be given autonomy to decide for themselves because it is essential for the sustainable development. Women empowerment is paramount to achieve gender justice. This is another objective of SDGs.(Pathania, 2017). This Agenda tries for inclusive development and make the society resilient. India in par with the developed countries should give importance to the issues of women involvement as entrepreneur emphasizing more on the rural areas. An active participation of women is essential to achieve gender equality envisioned by the United Nations. *Empowerment of women is momentous for achieving gender equality.*(WHO, 2018) UN member states have agreed for sustainability, peace and human progress in uniformity. Empowerment is one of tools to achieve the goals enshrined in SDG, 2030.

1.2 Women Entrepreneurship:

Entrepreneurship is a mechanism for up gradation of women who being educated and skilled is lagging in confidence to participate in the financial and social well being. (Parveen, 2023). There are several government programs and schemes. These schemes are meant to encourage the skills of women. Despite of receiving such opportunities many fail to apply those skills in their day to day life. The reasons could be due to lack of awareness in channelizing their skills. Thus, it means that providing trainings and launching skills should be supported with providing awareness. It is so necessary because the Agenda 2030 is envisioned in transforming the lives of women. They should be enabled to face the uncertain and unprecedented challenges of the globe.

1.3 Handloom in Assam

Handloom industry is one of the oldest industries in India of which the popularity have increased with the passing years. It has a scope of employability and for the weavers handloom is the major source of income and livelihood. Handloom predominantly is a rural occupation performed mostly by the women. Especially in the state of Assam the indigenous people uses the local herbs and plants for weaving. (Bori & Bhattacharyya, 2021) The history of weaving in Assam can be traced back to the days of Ahom Kingdom wherein separate machineries were used for unique and glamorous pieces of silk cloth.(Singha & Singha, 2020) Since then handloom brings revenue to the state and to the country.

Handloom is considered to be the 2nd largest employer and one of the most important cottage industries in the country.(Mishra, 2019). Indian Textile Industry contributes about 5 % of the country's Gross Domestic Product and 14 % to the overall index of Industrial Production.(Textile) Since independence there was a strike in the weaving sector in India. It also has a traditional and cultural relevance to a greater extend. Similarly in case of Bodo weaving it is performed from time immemorial which became like a traditional knowledge for the entire community. Presently very few from the community are practicing traditional weaving for the livelihood.

1.4 Handloom Weaving in Bodo Community

Weaving is an art among Bodo women which is traditionally practiced. In the past, individual Bodo weavers began this tradition by creating clothing for their own use and for their families. They carve timber themselves to create the "flying shuttle" which is a handloom tool. (Boro, 2017) Previously, the women of every household weaved their own clothing using that specific flying shuttle. Without weaving, the domestic tasks were seen inadequate.(Brahma, 2014) Handloom weaving is thus a traditional knowledge. Bodo handloom weavers are skilled enough to compete with the power loom weavers and conquer the competitive market. The encouragement

from govt. administration can unfold their trouble and help them overcome the difficulties. The same can be done effectively by the Bodoland Territorial Council (B.T.C) authorities.

1.5 Role to be played by the Bodoland Territorial Council (B.T.C)

Kokrajhar district is the headquarter of Bodoland Territorial Region (B.T.R). The region functions through Bodoland Territorial Council which is an elected body formed as per para 3B of the Constitution of India. B.T.C. is vested with power to make laws with regard to 40 subject matters. Handloom and Textile is one of the 40 subject matters in which a law can be enacted by the B.T.C. administration. (RIGHTS)

1.6 International Conventions

World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) toolkit 2017 (Organization, 2017) and booklet of 2020 (WIPO, 2020) takes initiatives in strengthening the economic conditions of the traditional knowledge holders by granting them rights. United Nations Population Fund is the organization that promotes for sexual and reproductive health. It advocates for gender equality and gives women the freedom to make decisions about their bodies and future. At its inaugural international conference, held at Cairo in 1994, women empowerment is regarded as a foundation for their sustainability in economic and social advancement. (Program)

This conference gave birth to Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030. World Health Organization (WHO) recently in 2021 is committed towards gender equality and women empowerment. It aims in ending inequality and advancing reproductive health to achieve human rights globally. This is focused in increasing the empathy towards those women and girls who are facing violence in health. WHO also has undertaken to provide training to the health care workers for supporting Global Plan of Action to support women and girls facing health violence.(WHO, 2021)

1.7 History of Handloom Census in India

4th Handloom Census published by Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India, 2019 – 20 showed that there is a rise in the total number of handloom weaving households. The survey was conducted by the M/s. Karvy Data Management, Hyderabad.(Census, 2019-2020) According to this census the total number of households engaged in weaving activities is 31.45 lakhs whereas as per the 3rd Handloom census conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) showed that there are about 27.83 lakhs of household engaged in handloom activities.(India, 2009-2010) The range of increase from 1st, 2nd and 3rd handloom census report are as 22.6 lakhs, 25.3 lakhs and 27.83 lakhs which clearly shows that the number of household engaged in handloom activities have increased over few decades. The reason behind the increase in the no. of households engaged in handloom is due to the initiative taken by the Govt. of India. The report states that GOI has diligently designed the system intending to involve various oversight measures by multiple stakeholders from the Govt. machinery.

4th Handloom Census is conducted on 2545312 weavers' households. Out of all the states in India, Assam alone has 10.9 lakhs of weavers households followed by West Bengal with 3.4 lakhs, Manipur with 2.1 lakhs and Tamil Nadu with 1.7 lakhs of households. (Fourth India Handloom Census, 2019 – 20, Office of the Development Commissioner for Handlooms, Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India.) The study also revealed about the following:

Table 1 No. of weavers in rural and urban areas.

Weavers in Rural Area	Weavers in Urban Area
2.5 lakhs coming upto 88.7 %	2.8 lakhs coming upto 11.3 %

- ❖ Out of the total 72% of the handloom weavers are female.

Table 2 Age Group -

Rural Areas	Urban Areas
14 – 18 years	14 – 18 years

- ❖ About only 14 % of the total weavers have completed the primary education and 1 out of 4 have received formal education.

Table 3 Average No. of Working Days

Rural Areas	Urban Areas
201	262

Table 4 Income per month

Rural Areas	Urban Areas
66.3 % of weavers earn <Rs. 5,000/-	36 % & of weavers earn >Rs 5,000/-

The report ascertains that there is a rise in earnings as compared to 3rd Handloom census and the reasons could be due to the initiatives taken by the Govt. like welfare schemes and financial assistance such as National Handloom Development Program (NHDP), Comprehensive Welfare Schemes, Yarn Supply Schemes. In addition there are other insurance and loan schemes such as Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY) (MUDRA) loan for the development and growth of micro enterprises. Alongside the Govt. has also introduced India Handloom Brand to enhance the market demand.

Table 5 Insurance Scheme

Rural Areas	Urban Areas
3.1 % only held insurance policies among weavers	7 % only held insurance policies among weavers

- ❖ In total only 3.8 % of the weavers hold insurance policies.

4th Handloom Census also mentioned about the allied workers and conducted a study on 848421 weavers in total. Similarly to the weavers, the allied workers involved in pre weaving stages belong to the age group of 14 – 18 years.

Table 7 No of Male and Female workers

Female	Male
27.1 %	20.5%

Table 8 No. of Male Workers:

Rural Areas	Urban Areas
54%	62.2%

2. Statement of Problem

Bodo handloom weavers are lacking in earning livelihood due to their weakness in surviving the competitive market. Handloom welfare schemes sanctioned by the Government are not able to outreach the entire handloom weavers.

3. Results and Findings:

Handloom weaving is still an activity rather than a profession. Previously weaving used to be an art of every woman especially in rural areas. It used to be like any other household chores without which the day is incomplete. Women used to have flying shuttle in their respective houses. They used to weave for their personal use only. Therefore, earning livelihood through weaving was a rare thing. Its contribution in India's economy is significant since 19th Century. (Chaudhary et al., 2015)



Figure 1 This picture represents the Bodo weaving with flying shuttle

This picture depicts that the Bodo handloom weavers are under privileged who cannot even afford to have a proper work shed due to lack of income generation.

The usual set – up of handloom weaving from home to weaving at centers was introduced after the existence of Master Weavers and introduction of Primary Weavers' Cooperative Societies, Apex Handloom Weaver Society, National Handloom Development Corporation and other welfare schemes the conception of handloom weaving has changed. (Mishra et al., 2016) Unfortunately, a number of apex societies and loom corporations have gone out of business in the recent five to ten years. This has happened as a result of losses, bad management, overstaffing, and inadequate marketing and distribution methods. Most cooperative societies engaged in the handloom sector have suffered as a result. The short term cooperative credit structure's shortcoming made the problem even more obvious.

Poor production, lesser pay, and middlemen's influence have put it in a crisis. The crisis is also due to the advent of modern tools and technology. Power loom, an advanced tool of weaving is slowly trying to replace handloom. The handloom market is now small and dominated by a few handloom owners. (Aswani & Bhat) The shift from handloom to power loom is taking place because of the huge profit margin. The other reason for shifting is that power loom is based on technology and does not require skilled weavers. A handloom task requires a lot of skilled labor, and both the pre- and post-weaving processes include numerous individuals.

Power loom weaving is a completely mechanical process that doesn't call for specialized personnel. For instance, power loom uses machine to create the design and warp, load the bobbin with thread, polish, etc. Not all of them are necessary. Two or three power loom machines can be operated by a single individual at once. (Shrivastava, 2020) The other reason is because the power loom produces more number of clothes in comparison to handloom.



Figure 2 This picture represents the Bodo weaving with power loom

This picture depicts that power loom weaving is in advantageous position because it clearly shows that there is a proper work shed considering the comfort of the weavers.

3.1 The active welfare programs/schemes at present in Kokrajhar district are: -

- i. Capacity Building Program using ICT tools and Technology to Enhance Livelihood of Weavers / Artisans of B.T.R.
- ii. SwarnibharNaari Scheme
- iii. Project of Handloom Mark

3.2 Capacity Building Program using ICT tools and Technology to Enhance Livelihood of Weavers / Artisans of B.T.R

This is a training program undertaken by the Handloom Department of B.T.R targeting near about 5000 weavers and their family. The period of this training is of 3 years. (Department)

3.3 SwarnibhaarNaari, 2021 – 22 (Naari, 2021)

The Assam Government has announced measures to buy traditional hand - woven goods directly from local weavers. This initiative is taken in accordance with a request made by the Directorate of Handloom and Textile. Such customary hand - woven goods will be directly marketed through the show rooms of ARTFED and AGMC Limited. They will be established both within the state and outside of it. This decision has been made to prevent middlemen. This program also aims to provide high - quality training to improve participants' handloom skills because the majority of native weavers still utilize traditional equipment. The entire procedure of buying hand - woven goods from the local weavers is administered by the Director of Handloom and Textiles. The Director of Handloom was purchasing hand - woven goods from local weavers. The one and only Bodo traditional cloth this is considered under this swarnibharnaari scheme is '*Aronai*'. The other items like dokhona, jwmgra are not taken into consideration under this scheme.

The beneficiary weavers of this program must register on the swarnibharnaari.assam.gov.in site by linking their ADHAR number to their information. Following this registration, the weavers will be subject to a field inspection by the authorities. The price of traditional hand - woven goods must be in line with their quality and size, which will be periodically assessed by an expert committee formed by the Govt. The Government of Assam will release the approved funds and deposit them in the designated bank accounts of the recipients. Any of these receipts or scheme-related income must be placed in the designated bank accounts. The items will be procured and amount for the same will be paid within 4 days.

A minimum of 100 benchmarked goods i.e; "*Aronai*" shall be purchased by the authority from registered weavers. Establishment of district - specific procurement centers will be based on registration information. Depending on the availability of the products, such centers may operate for a maximum of 30 days beyond the first 15-day period. Each procurement committee will be headed by a centre in charge.\

3.4 Handloom Mark Project (Textile)

In order to brand handloom items in both the domestic and global markets, the Central Government introduced the Handloom Mark Scheme in 2006. The Handloom, Textiles and Sericulture Department of Assam government has also begun this programme. Handloom mark serves as a marker of the tradition and rich culture of Indian handloom textiles, thereby promoting distinctive works of art, skills, and other attributes of the local populace. This handloom brand aims to give weavers direct market access without the involvement of agencies or other third parties.

Additionally, the weavers must register on this app in order to get direct orders from the customers. Using the "*weaver app*," customers may place direct orders with weavers. The app enables buyers to scan product codes that are labeled with information about authenticity, place of manufacture, weavers' details, etc. This will enable the weavers to take e orders directly with weavers. The Handloom Mark project aims to preserve the rich and varied cultural history of India.

This project is ongoing throughout the B.T.R. under the aegis of Handloom Department of every district. The weavers are asked to register online by uploading the relevant documents and necessary information. The Assistant Director being the head of the department in a district is engaged for the verification of the data uploaded by the weavers and also visits the weavers in physical for transparency.

3.5 Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Welfare Scheme

i. Pradhan Mantri Jeevan JyotiBimaYojana (PMJJBY) (P. M. J. J. B. Yojana, 2015): - The Handloom department of B.T.R. implements this welfare program of insurance from the Central Government known as Pradhan Mantri Jeevan JyotiBimaYojana (PMJJBY) for the benefit of weavers. The premium rate was previously Rs. 330/- per year, but it is now raised to Rs. 436/- per year. The Ministry of Textiles is responsible for paying Rs. 150/- of the total sum of Rs. 436/- while the rest are provided by the weavers themselves. This insurance coverage can be started at any age between 18 and 50. However, the premium is payable until the age of 55. The weavers are only entitled to a maximum of Rs. 2,00,000 (Rupees Two Lakhs) for all types of deaths.

ii. Pradhan Mantri Suraksha BimaYojna (PMSBY)(P. M. S. B. Yojana, 2015): - The Handloom Department of B.T.R. is responsible for implementing the Pradhan Mantri Suraksha BimaYojna (PMSBY), a welfare insurance program for the benefit of weavers. The annual premium for this policy is Rs. 20/-; of that, Rs. 12/- are paid by the Handloom Department and Rs. 8/- are paid by the actual weavers. This insurance coverage can be started at any age between 18 and 70. For any death, including deaths brought on by natural disasters, weavers are eligible to receive up to Rs. 2,00,000/- (Rupees Two Lakhs).

Only 13 weavers in the Kokrajhar area have signed up for this insurance coverage, which plainly indicates that weavers are either unaware of it or unable to meet its eligibility standards. For the same reasons mentioned above, only three weavers have registered for the PMSBY insurance policy in the Kokrajhar district. The majority of home weavers are unaware of the many available schemes, according to the 4th Handloom Census Report. It has been shown that 82% of weavers in rural areas work alone and are self-employed. Thus, it may be concluded that the majority of weavers are engaged in an unorganized setting.

iii. Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY) (Yojana): - Micro Units Development and Refinance Agency Ltd. (MUDRA) is a micro enterprise development program in India that provides loans to micro units in the manufacturing, trading, and service sectors in both rural and urban areas ranging from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 5,00,000. In exchange, it offers assistance with refinancing to banks, microfinance institutions, and other lending organizations approved by the authority. The recipients of this yojana, Shishu, Kishore, and Tarun, will receive fund ranging from Rs. 50,000/- (Rupees Fifty Thousand Only), Rs. 5,00,000/- (Rupees Five Lakhs Only), and Rs. 10,00,000/- (Rupees Ten Lakhs Only). The major goal of this program is to inspire the younger generation to develop businesses and begin their own businesses. The goal is to support the sector's overall development and expansion of micro businesses. MUDRA loan are of two kinds. One is the Micro financing Scheme, which is provided by Micro Finance Institutions (MFI) and offers financing of up to Rs 1 lakh for a variety of small company and micro enterprise activities. It is given to SHGs and individuals as well in order to foster microbusiness and small business activity. Refinancing plans for commercial banks, regional banks, and small finance institutions are another type of credit plan. By funding micro enterprises and women entrepreneurs, these banks may be able to refinance term loans and working capital loans up to Rs 10,00,000/- (Rupees Ten Lakhs Only) per unit. The financing banks could also provide additional facilities or lower interest rates.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

The women today are already empowered but they need support and cooperation to participate for progressive development. For the advancement of civilization women's participation in economic development is essential. This above study established that the schemes introduced by the govt. has not benefitted to the larger no. of weavers. This can be evidenced from the data collected from the handloom departments. The no. of intake capacity of trainees in a year is very minimal if compared to the ratio of skilled interested weavers.

Schemes namely swarnibharnaari scheme and handloom mark scheme which aims in reserving “aronai” as a handloom item and sell them with a handloom mark in it. These schemes are highly commendable but soon these schemes should also be implemented in all the dresses of Bodo Community. However there are other products which are traditionally made and still not under the consideration of these schemes.

Handloom Reservation Act, 1985 is also not being implemented properly. The list of reserved handloom item declared on 3rd September, 2008 by the Ministry of Textiles such as Dokhona as reserved under Sl. No. 11 (vi) (Act, 1985) is not implemented at all. Meaning thereby that there are schemes and legislative laws but they are not well implemented. In order to implement comprehensively the B.T.C. govt. can take initiatives which will also support women.

There is no stable market to sell the hand woven items for the rates fixed by them because the market is dominated by power loom products. Despite of such difficulties the traditional weavers have not stopped weaving and are continuously selling their products.

The present active schemes of B.T.R is not considering all the Bodo traditional products but just one of them which is bringing advantages to a very limited weavers. This may also lead to a phase where the weavers will stop weaving other items but just “aronai”. This will definitely threaten the very existence of other items. It is to be emphasised that the better implementation of Handloom Reservation Act, 1985 will help to bring better status to the Bodo traditional women weavers. Also introduction of a comprehensive scheme reserving all the handloom products and giving a unique identification no. to them will encourage weavers. This effort could bring sustainability of the traditional items and also empower women to do things on their own and earn livelihood with that.

Weaving should be concentrated not just an activity but it should be given a scope of vocational course in the academics so that from the very young age the interest and skills are generated in a child. This will further create professionalism.

5. Declaration

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