



## **ADOPTION OF COMMERCIAL WEAVING AS AN INCOME GENERATING TOOL IN RURAL ECONOMY: LESSONS ON OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE DISTRICT OF NALBARI, ASSAM**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Weaving and spinning occupies an important place in our society which is related with our rich cultural heritage. It is an age old tradition of our society. It is the second largest employment provider industry next to agriculture in our country providing employment to millions of workers. However, it is unfortunate that proper care is not taken for all-round development of the handloom industry in the region. This industry has been facing with enormous problems today. Therefore, in this context, the present study aims to examine a research question: Can commercial weaving be adopted as an income generating tool in rural economy? It is followed by another question: What are the opportunities and challenges of the commercial weaving? Both qualitative and quantitative approach is adopted in the present study to collect necessary data. The study draws its empirical data using in-depth interview method with the key respondents (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The key respondents in this study include the weavers including male and female. The researcher interviewed forty six weavers (taking twenty three each from male and female weavers) under Ghoga Gaon Panchayat in the district of Nalbari, Assam. The paper argues that commercial weaving can be adopted as an income generating tool for development of the rural economy.

**KEY WORDS:** Commercial Weaving, Gender, Handloom, Rural Economy, Women Empowerment.

**INTRODUCTION:**

Weaving and spinning occupies an important place in our society which is related with our rich cultural heritage. It is an age old tradition of our society. Almost all the households of the villages of Assam are more or less involved with the traditional weaving. It is the second largest employment provider industry next to agriculture in our country providing employment to millions of workers. However, it is unfortunate that proper care is not taken for the all-round development of the handloom industry in the region. Although various committees are appointed to resolve the issues of handloom industry, yet it is not up to the expectation level. This industry has been facing with enormous problems today. Therefore, in this context, the present study aims to examine a research question: Can commercial weaving be adopted as an income generating tool in rural economy? It is followed by another question: What are the opportunities and challenges of the commercial weaving? These questions are very crucial as it is related with the existence of the handloom industry on the one hand and economic development of the rural masses on the other hand. It is because this industry is running with different problems on many grounds. Both qualitative and quantitative approach is adopted in the present study to collect necessary data. The paper argues that commercial weaving can be adopted as an income generating tool for development of the rural economy.

This paper is organized in the following sections. Section 1 discusses the existing relevant literature on handloom, commercial weaving and economic development. The methodology of the study is explained in section II. Section III sketches the context of the study. The findings and analysis of the study followed by recommendations are presented in section IV. Section V summarizes the study.

**LITERATURE REVIEW:**

Before reviewing the related literature, the present study first clarifies the term, i.e. commercial weaving. In this study, commercial weaving refers to the highly commercialized, business oriented weaving equipped with modern technology. It is related with high income generating option in comparison to traditional weaving.

One of the oldest industry of our country is handloom. It provides economic incentives as well as increases social prestige too. Therefore, some scholars argue that weaving craftsmanship in India is outstanding (Savithri et al, 2014). Scholars like Reddy argue that next to agriculture, handloom is the largest employment provider in rural India. It also provides employment to some households in semi-urban and urban areas of India (Reddy, 2006).

There are some scholars who argue that handloom economy contributes to economic growth and employment generation, especially in rural areas (Monsen et al, 2012; Ellis, 1998). Handloom is a human-engaged industry with low usage of machinery (Bhavani, 2002).

Some scholars relate handloom with women empowerment. They argue that women empowerment with better socio-economic condition can be realized through expansion of handloom sector (Rath et al, 2007). Highlighting the involvement of women in handloom sector, Goswami opined that around 60% of weavers in Assam are women engaging in traditional or commercial handloom industry (Goswami, 2006).

Another set of literature argue that women engage in handloom not only as a tradition but also as a trade to earn money (Deng, Wang and Alon, 2011). Through weaving, they may enhance their economic status also as there are limited scope of engagement for the females outside their home. Thus, it contributes to women empowerment (Hazarika and Goswami, 2016).

A set of existing scholars argue that as a labor-intensive sector, handloom provides employment opportunities even to unskilled labor (Tabunan, 2009). It is not possible in some other sectors where skilled labourers are recruited. Besides, prospects of commercial weaving in proliferation of income is comparatively high. Therefore, individuals are more likely to open up own entrepreneurship when they have choice to be self-employed (Douglas and Shepherd, 2000).

Some scholars argue that weaving sector has a bright future which may be a career option for the unemployed individuals. They argue that there is a bright future for this sector as customer awareness is increasing in recent times as witnessed in states like Andhra Pradesh (Vaddi and Balakrishnaiah, 2009).

Another set of scholars argue that earning of women is lower compared to men for the same work because of ongoing discrimination (Norsworthy, 2003; Berik et al, 2004; Gerry et al, 2004). Even, contract-based wage is also responsible for lower earning of the weavers in handloom sector as seen in North East of India (Goswami, 2006). Besides these, there are some other factors including educational attainment, job tenure, experience in job, and training which have impacts upon wage for the labor force in handloom sector (Ogloblin and Brock, 2005).

Weaving is another alternative solution for the livelihood of the landless people. Through weaving, they may earn their livelihood to fulfill their daily needs. Thus,

handloom is a non-farm economic platform creating opportunities for livelihood, especially to the landless people (Gebremariam, et al, 2009).

There are some scholars who relate markets and awareness of the customers for the development of the weaving sector. They argue that customers are not adequately aware about handloom products because of marketing problem (Kumudha and Rizwana, 2012). Therefore, scholars like Davis argue that deployment of modern marketing tactics can accelerate proliferation of handloom (Davis, 1976). Besides, information about market opportunities can enhance productivity of handloom sector (Nachimuthu and Gunatharan, 2012).

Scholars like Sarmistha argue that skilled weavers migrate from one place to another for better employment opportunities in the same sector (Sarmistha, 2009). However, wage changes according to quality and skill of the labor force, indicating wage dependence on workers' productivity in handloom sector (Dickens and Katz, 1987; Darity, 1991).

Adequate finance is needed for the development of the weaving sector. But, paucity of fund may be an obstacle for the upliftment of this industry. Therefore, some scholars argue that availability and accessibility to microfinance add to the advantage of the weavers (Poon et al, 2012).

Raw material is one of the essential ingredients of any industry which is not exception in case of the weaving industry too. But, lack of quality raw material is one of the major problems for most of the small-scale weavers (Bhagavatula, 2010). Even, uncontrolled hike in the price of the yarn also creates problem for the weavers. Thus, changes appeared in handloom sector which have adverse impacts upon the lives of the people engaged in handloom (Sarmistha, 2009).

Handloom is a small-scale cottage industry (Sarmistha, 2009). Handloom industry constitutes one of the cottage industries that India possessed (Venakteswaran, 2014). However, money lenders' or traders' control over handloom is evident leading to larger profit share by them at the cost of the weavers (Sarmistha, 2009). Besides, the issues like involvement of middlemen, lack of financial resources, failure of use modern technology, inadequate supply of raw materials, and entry of power-loom in textile sector challenge handloom sector (Bhagavatula, 2010).



## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The paper contains the following basic objectives:

- 1) To assess the role of commercial weaving as an income generating tool for development of the rural economy;
- 2) To analysis the opportunities and challenges of the commercial weaving.

## METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

This study is based on both qualitative and quantitative approach. The study draws its empirical data using in-depth interview method with the key respondents (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The weavers under Ghoga Gaon Panchayat in the district of Nalbari, Assam are the key respondents in this study which include both male and female. The researcher interviewed forty six weavers (taking twenty three each from male and female weavers). With prior approval of the respondents, the interviews were recorded. These were transcribed and then analyzed using content analysis method.

The 61 No. Ghoga Gaon Panchayat consists of different socio-cultural and religious communities under Barkhetri Development Block of Nalbari district. It is located in 60 No. Barkhetri Legislative Assembly Constituency of Assam surrounded by Village Dagapara in the North, Kurihamari Panchayat in the South, Loharkatha in the East and Kandhbari Panchayat in the West. According to official census of 2011, there are 20489 total population in this Gaon Panchayat, out of which 10317 and 10172 are males and females respectively (Census, 2011). Nalbari district, covering an area of 1052 sq.km, situated in the lower Brahmaputra Valley is one of the District of Assam. It is surrounded by Kamrup district on the East, Barpeta district on the West, Baska district on the North and the Brahmaputra River on the South (Das, 2020:477). According to 2011 census, there are 7.72 lakh population in the district out of which 3.96 lakh and 3.76 lakh are males and females respectively. There are 7 development blocks, 65 gaon panchayats and 456 villages in the Nalbari district (Census, 2011). In the following table (Table 1), the profile of the respondent has been presented.

**Table 1: Profile of the Respondents**

Caste (%)		Religion (%)		Eco. Status (%)		Income(%)		Education (%)		
Gen	OBC	Hindu	Other	BPL	APL	10000-20000	Above 20000	I to X	HS	BA
76	24	100	00	70	30	70	30	76	15	9

Source: Primary Data Collection

According to the profile of the respondents, majority of them belonged to general category (76%). Only 24% of the respondents are from Other Backward Class (OBC) category. In the present study, all the respondents belonged to Hindu religion. No respondent was found from other category.

Regarding economic status of the respondents, they are categorized as Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Above Poverty Line (APL). As per their response, it was found that 70% and 30% were under BPL and APL category respectively. Regarding monthly income, seventy percent of the respondents earned rupees ten to twenty thousand while thirty percent earned above twenty thousand. From the educational status of the respondents, it was found that majority of them i.e. 76% are within class 1 to 10<sup>th</sup> standard, 15% up to Higher Secondary (HS) and only 09% of them have passed the Bachelor of Arts (BA) examination.

### **CONTEXT OF THE STUDY:**

Weaving is the second largest employment provider industry next to agriculture in our country providing employment to millions of workers. It is an age old tradition of our society. However, it is unfortunate that proper care is not taken for all-round development of the handloom industry in the region. In spite of having high commercial opportunity, this industry has been facing with enormous challenges today. Commercial weaving with blend of aesthetic views with the handloom products may be an alternative way to agriculture in the rural areas for generating income. It minimizes the gender gaps in our society by giving equal pay or wage for equal work irrespective of their gender. Therefore, in this context, the present study aims to examine whether commercial weaving can be adopted as an income generating tool for development of the rural economy. This paper contributes to literature on gender equality, commercial weaving and women empowerment.

### **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS:**

The empirical findings of the present study conducted in the Ghoga Gaon Panchayat in Nalbari district are presented in this section. With the help of some sub points, the findings and analysis of the study are presented here.

***Commercial Weaving and Livelihood***

Everyone needs means of living to fulfill daily requirements. It is found in the present study that commercial weaving has become a viable alternative of their livelihood. All the respondents of the present study expressed that commercial weaving was their main source of income and livelihood. As discussed earlier, next to agriculture, handloom is the largest employment provider in the rural India. It is one of the main sources of income and livelihood. It is also one of the cottage industries which need less man power as well as machines. Weaving is an outstanding craft that needs willingness first to start their business. It is also helpful for the unemployed youths through which they can earn their livelihood.

***Commercial Weaving and Economic Empowerment***

It is also found in the present study that commercial weaving helps in economic empowerment of the weavers specially the female weavers. As there are less job opportunities for the females outside their home, they may earn as per their capabilities through weaving in their home or in their locality without any fear. This may lead them to be independent economically which ultimately empower them in the society.

***Blend of Aesthetic and Handloom: High Commercial Opportunity***

When we blend aesthetic view with the handloom products, then it increases the demand in the market and finally it increases income. In other words, there is high commercial opportunity if we can design a new outlook to the handloom products. But, it needs proper training and equipments on the part of the weavers. It is also evident from the words of a respondent: "I know that I can earn more by blending aesthetic views with handloom products. It has high demand in the market. But, it needs money which I cannot afford due to lack of fund." However, another respondent informed that he comparatively earned high than his fellow weavers by adding some new design in his products. He did it because of its high demand in the market. It is thus evident from the study that blend of aesthetic views with the handloom products have high demands in the market with better commercial opportunity.

***Commercial Weaving and Minimization of Gender Gap***

Another major finding of the present study is that commercial weaving minimizes the gender gaps in our society. It is found in the study that everyone gets equal pay or wage for equal work irrespective of their gender which is generally not applicable in other sectors. This is also evident from the response of a women weaver who is also our respondent: "Before joining in weaving sector, I did not get equal wage for my work with that of the male workers. But now, I always get equal wage along with the male weavers on the basis of my capabilities. There is no any discrimination on the basis of gender i.e. same wage both for male and female weavers." Thus, the study contributes that commercial weaving has a positive impact which abolishes gender disparity from our society regarding equal pay for equal work. This finding of the study disagrees with the arguments that earning of women is lower compared to men for the same work because of ongoing discrimination (Norsworthy, 2003; Berik et al, 2004; Gerry et al, 2004).

***Commercial Weaving as a Hope for Landless People***

Assam is a land of agriculture which needs land for cultivation. But today, due to the increasing population, the area of land has become less. In this regard, commercial weaving may be a viable alternative for their livelihood. It is because weaving can be started within the four walls of their home having no extra land for the same. Thus, the study argues that commercial weaving can be an alternative way to agriculture in the rural areas for generating income.

### ***Commercial Weaving and Government Support***

For running any business or industry, support and incentives from the government is very essential. It may be materialistic or non-materialistic. This is also applicable in case of the commercial weaving. It is found in the study that in spite of various efforts made by the government, this sector has not developed as per the expectations of both the weavers and the government. It is because the real benefits of the government policies and programmes have not touched the beneficiaries properly. Therefore, there should have proper mechanism to monitor various schemes for the development of the commercial weaving sector.

### ***Commercial Weaving and Prospects of Marketing***

Adequate marketing facilities play an important role in the development of any business. In the present study, it is found that due to lack of proper markets, the weavers have not got proper benefit of their products. They are bound to sell their products at a very meagre rate. However, commercial weaving is one of the emerging business sector which needs proper marketing. As said above, if the handloom products are blended with aesthetic views, then definitely it will be able catch the high demand of the competitive markets. In other words, there is high commercial opportunity if we can design a new outlook to the handloom products.

### ***Commercial Weaving and Migration of Labour***

Commercial weaving, generally found in urban and semi-urban areas, attracts the skilled labourers. It is highly commercialized, business oriented weaving equipped with modern technology and related with high income generating option in comparison to traditional weaving. People can migrate from rural to urban areas in search of job or income where they may earn higher income than the rural areas. However, migration of labourers from one place to another may be a threat also for this industry. Besides, the experienced weavers may start their own business independently which can be seen in these words of a respondent: "I had started my business three years ago with five weavers and two helpers. But now, due to the migration of labourers from one factory to another, I am compelled to close my business." Thus, it is clear from the study that migration of weavers from one place to another may be a threat for the industry on the one hand and an opportunity for the weavers on the other hand.

### ***Commercial Weaving and Paucity of Fund***

Availability of funds is very essential for the development of the commercial weaving. It may also encourage the unemployed educated youths. For this purpose, there should have adequate finance, loans from the banks and other financial institutions. However, in the study, it is found that the weavers have been facing with great financial hardships. Loans are not granted to the aspirant weavers who wanted to start their business by the local bank as expressed by one of the respondents: "I approached the manager of the local bank to grant me a loan for starting my business. But, he was not willing to grant the same." However, another respondent expressed his views as follows: "We are unable to sanction a loan from the bank due to the bad repayment history of our fellow weavers who have not refunded their loans in time." Thus, the study reveals that due to bad repayment schedule of some of the weavers, the genuine weavers are affected badly in this regard. The financial institutions are not willing to provide loans to the new weavers of that locality. It is worth mentioning here that the problem is not emerging from the banking sector or the government alone, some weavers are also responsible for the same.



### ***Commercial Weaving and Fluctuation in the Price of Yarn***

Another finding of the study is bad impact of the fluctuation in the price of yarn. Due to this reason, the commercial weaving have been suffering badly. Even some of the respondents expressed their views that they will have to stop their business in near future if the prices of the yarn and other materials relating to commercial weaving is increasing frequently. Thus, it reveals that fluctuation in the price of yarn, it is suffering a lot.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

On the basis of the above findings and analysis, we may forward the following recommendations:

- Extensive awareness and training programme for the weavers should be organised which will improve their capability and efficiency. Adequate training given to the weavers and associated labors can also change productivity in handloom sector (Mehta and Mehta, 2011).
- The women, especially in the rural areas get less opportunities in other industrial and trade sectors. Therefore, the weaving sector should be developed which will enhance the job prospects and opportunities for the rural women.
- The government should come forward with adequate policies and programmes for this sector. There must have some specific rules to control the money lenders and middlemen who try to exploit the hard working weavers.
- Financial institutions should come forward to encourage the unemployed persons by sanctioning loans and other financial helps. Of course, such institutions should also take strict actions against those who neglect to repay their previous loans.
- There should have proper marketing facilities along with controlling of unnecessary price hike of the raw materials that are involved with this sector.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

The present study reveals that the weaving industry is running with various problems. However, from the findings and analysis of the study it may be said that commercial weaving can be adopted as a viable income generating tool for economic development of the rural society. Agricultural uncertainty can also be addressed by handloom sector (Abdulai and Delgado, 1999). In other words, weaving or handloom sector may be an alternative way of livelihood. It provides economic incentives as well as increases social prestige too. Therefore, the need of the hour as well as our duty is to expand it with all modern technological innovations along with proper training to the weavers those who are involved in this sector. Besides, there should have a comprehensive perspective planning which covers different aspects of handloom production, promotion and development. Only then, this age old tradition will be able to survive in today's competitive world.

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