

## HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN COLONIAL ASSAM

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### ABSTRACT

*Handloom industry has been one of the most important cottage industries of Assam since pre colonial period. Initially, with the advent of the colonial rule its importance was declined. It was the commercial policy of the new regime which required raw materials of the region for the growing industries in England. This led to the decline of handloom industry in Assam which flourished during the Ahom period. Moreover, with the advent of new regime patronage towards the industry was also reduced. The new rulers wanted to reduce Assam into a producer of raw material and to create Assam a market for the finished products which was a part of British commercial policy. After the declaration of Charter of 1833 one of the major policies of the British government was to take raw materials to run the British industries.<sup>i</sup> Thus, the dark era of handloom weaving started with the British rule as they were interested only in finding markets for Lancashire products.<sup>ii</sup> But with the passage of time the colonial rulers put emphasis on handloom industry. The British put emphasis on silk and yarn production, not in manufactured production. It was the Assam hand-woven silk fabric which had a commercial demand in the market.<sup>iii</sup> This led to the shift in the British policy towards handloom industry. Thus, manufactured production was given emphasis in the beginning of twentieth century. In order to augment the handloom industry weaving schools and cooperative societies were set up. The weaving master of Assam was first appointed the year 1913.<sup>iv</sup> Prior to the British, the handloom industry in Assam was in primitive mode. The colonial rulers had used modern tools and technology in this cottage industry. The traditional weavers could not stand with new tools and technology. The use of modern tools and technology was closely associated with commercialisation of handloom products. With the advancement in tools and technology there was growth of handloom products. These products were marketed by the colonial rulers with new commercial policies. Moreover, there was also development of sericulture industry. Thus, imperialistic policy was framed in case of handloom industry as well. This paper attempts to study the commercial policy and technological advancement of the British in handloom industry.*

**Keywords:** *Handloom, Weavers, Technology, Commercialisation, Colonial rule.*

Assam has been known for handloom weaving and silk industry since the time immemorial. It can be traced to 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Arthashastra mentioned that several regions of ancient Kamrup had produced three varieties of silk fabrics, viz., Dakula, Patrona and Khauma. Dakula, Patrona and Kahuma are identified as *muga*, *pat* and *eri* by historians. 'Harsa Charita' mentioned one kind of *dukula* cotton which was sent as a present to king Harsa by King Bhaskaravarman of Kamrupa.<sup>v</sup> This handloom weaving industry continued to be one of the major cottage industries during the colonial period. It is also referred in the Ramayana about its existence. It is the most widespread cottage industry in Assam having sufficient vitality in it. There is a loom in every Assamese family and skill in weaving is considered to be one of the best accomplishments of an Assamese woman.<sup>vi</sup>

There is a notion that emergence of colonial rule in Assam destroyed the handloom weaving industry in Assam. The advent of the British came the dark era of handloom weaving in Assam. The British did not evince any interest in the development of this national industry. They were keen only to find markets for their Lancashire products and as such weaving industry faced keen competition from the mill-made cheap goods which dominated the markets situated even in the remote areas. The traditional weavers could not withstand the competition and left their age old occupation to find employment in other sectors.<sup>vii</sup> It is partially right to say that handloom industry was declined to certain extent during the colonial period. It was mainly because of impulse of the British policy of trade and commerce rather than establishment of industries.

As handloom weaving is an ancient cottage industry in Assam, there were different types of this industry. There were loin looms (tied around the weavers' waist), country loom, fly shuttle loom, semi-automatic loom and automatic loom during the period. Loin loom was practised mainly by the tribes of hills. There was another type of loom called Pit loom. This was practised by the Bengali weavers of East Bengal. Most common loom in Assam was throw shuttle. Fly shuttle was introduced by the British who made efforts to expand the use of fly shuttle in the region. This attempt was made so that handloom production might be increased. Although handloom had been practised through several centuries, its technology remained stagnant at the stages of reeling, spinning and weaving. *Ugha chereki*, *mako*, spinning wheel, *neothani* etc. were some of the accessories required for weaving.<sup>viii</sup> Moreover, it is well known fact that handloom weaving constituted three silk fabrics (*muga*, *pat*, *eri*). Mostly similar technology was used for all the silk fabrics. *Bhir* or *bhowri* was the most common process used for *muga* reeling.<sup>ix</sup> *Eri* spinning was mostly done by hand spinning method which was very common in Assam.

On the eve of the coming of the British in Assam, primitive method and tools were used by the people in handloom weaving industry. Initially this tools and method was not changed by the British. But gradually with passage of time they were compelled to change the tools and technology in this sector as there was compulsion

under the colonial economic policy. For the convenience of study technology in handloom industry in the region, it may be divided into three categories. First category may be called as traditional technology. Second category in case of technology was *swadeshi* technology which emerged out of the anti-partition agitation and *swadeshi* movement in 1905. Third category with improved technology in handloom weaving started after 1920. In this category British attempted to spread the use of fly shuttle. Despite the fact there was little shift in technology, traditional method of throw shuttle was the most popular among the weavers of Assam.

British policy of trade and commerce and industrial policies were based on the necessities of colonial economy. Initially it was found that its necessity was raw silk of the province as raw materials for the growing industries. Therefore, they found that there was no necessity of giving impetus to handloom industry. They required at that time was market for finished products of England. Moreover, communication was also not that improved to develop handloom industry for which they didn't put emphasis on handloom industry. Thus, British inclination towards trade led to the decline of traditional handloom industry in Assam. With the passage of time they found that fabrics of the province and woven clothes were in high demand. There was also improvement in communication network which facilitated for the growth of handloom industry.

There were certain circumstances that led to the continuity of the first category of traditional technology during the colonial period. At the time of arrival the British followed the policy of monopoly of trade and commerce. This policy was necessitated by growing industries in England. The policy of the Charter Act of 1833 was also stuck to the collection of raw materials. The general policy of the British government to promote British industrial interests after the declaration of the Charter Act of 1833 had its impact on the indigenous industries of Assam. One of the major policies of the British government was to take raw materials to run the British industries.<sup>x</sup> Taking into consideration of this policy, British did not take initiative to improve the handloom industry of Assam in the initial period. The British henceforth, wanted to stick to silk trade instead of handloom industry. Besides, lack of iron and metals, and plenty of timber slowed the improvement of technology in handloom industry.

The *swadeshi* movement had an immediate impact in the sector of certain cottage industries of Assam. The beginning of the twentieth century saw a new chapter in the history of traditional industry of Assam as there was emergence of local entrepreneurs in Assam. This ushered a new phase of technological transformation which was combination of western knowledge and indigenous tradition and resources.<sup>xi</sup> While the emergence of the *swadeshi* capital and its investment in colonial Bengal brought about a remarkable breakthrough in the history of industry and technology, in Assam the concept of *swadeshi* was only accepted by a group of middleclass who had

an economic vision different from the mainstream Assamese nationalists of the period like Jagannath Barua and his compatriots and the nationalist institutions like Jorhat Sarvajanic Sabha and Assam Association.<sup>xii</sup> Mention may be made of Manomohan Lahiri who made his effort to improve the technology in handloom. He had used a six bobbin winding machine in his factory and with this machine he managed to make warp quickly.<sup>xiii</sup> This was a time saving method with little improvement in technology. He was followed by other swadeshi entrepreneurs. Asgar Ali, a small shopkeeper, influenced by the swadeshi ideas, invented a small spinning wheel worked by feet. Originally a businessman, R.K. Saraswati organised a small factory in Gauhati with 12 looms. This factory was also equipped with brass reeds and English healds.<sup>xiv</sup> Although the British government didn't take initiative, local entrepreneurs took initiatives towards technological change in respect of handloom industry during the *swadeshi* movement.

But the end of second decade of twentieth century saw the emergence of initiatives undertaken by the British. The British policy towards handloom industry had been changed under the compulsion of general economic and industrial policy of British. Moreover, the period also shows improved communication which facilitated for technological change in handloom sector. Moreover, it was the Assam hand-woven silk fabric which had a commercial demand in the market.<sup>xv</sup> This led to the shift in the British policy towards handloom industry. Thus, manufactured production was given emphasis in the beginning of twentieth century. In order to augment the handloom industry weaving schools and cooperative societies were set up. The weaving master of Assam was first appointed the year 1913.<sup>xvi</sup> This was the first initiative towards handloom industry in the region. With the purpose of taking initiative towards handloom industry, Mr. Hoogerf, the Principal of Serampore Govt Weaving Institute in Bengal was invited to pay a visit in Assam. After his visit he suggested for introduction of fly shuttle sley into the province.<sup>xvii</sup> Therefore, on the basis of the suggestion forwarded by Mr. Hoogerf it was decided to open local school of weaving for training of demonstrators in weaving on improved looms. They were also to be trained in the use of time and labour saving appliances such as jacquards and dobbies. Moreover, demonstration to introduce the fly shuttle looms and other improved appliances in this province began with the appointment of a weaving master by the Government in 1913.<sup>xviii</sup>

The first weaving school was formally started at Gauhati in the year 1919 with a few male and female students.<sup>xix</sup> It was attempted to carry out experiments in the reeling, spinning and weaving of local silk on improved machines. It was proved that most uniform yarn can be reeled from local mulberry cocoons by means of Salvation Army reeling machine. The result was that quality of yarn was superior and outturn was also more. Thus, spinning could be done most economically in a power spinning mill.<sup>xx</sup> Therefore, cocoons were exported to

Bombay and elsewhere for spinning in mills. Thus, a power spinning mill could be expected likely to be successful in Assam.

There was an important development in Assam in respect of industry which was creation of separate department of industry in the year 1918. After the creation of department efforts were made to improve the condition of handloom industry. There were two branches of for imparting instructions in weaving, viz., weaving schools and peripatetic demonstrations. These two branches continued to work for the improvement of handloom industry in the province. It is noteworthy to mention that there was growth of popularity of hand woven fabrics as a result of recent *swadeshi* agitation. On the hand, department was also able to introduce improved and labour saving methods in hand weaving and supply of yarns, looms and other requirements to weavers.<sup>xxi</sup> Within a very short span of time after the creation of the department of industry it was able to supply requirements of the weavers. In the year 1921-22, there was introduction of 162 fly shuttle frame looms, 18 fly shuttle sleys, 24 warping mills, 3 dobbies, 165 reeds, 152 heald sets, and 184 shuttles.<sup>xxii</sup> There was increase in the numbers of supply of requirements of the weavers in the next year. It was reported that from 1920-21 to 1927-28, 3000 fly shuttle looms and sleys had been introduced in 3000 families and all of them were at work.<sup>xxiii</sup>

It is to be noted that in spite of great economic distress, handloom weaving made good progress during the year 1930-31. The weaving parties introduced 462 fly shuttle looms including 3 jacquards and Hattersley machines, 47 warping machines and about 700 charkas.<sup>xxiv</sup> The introduction of fly shuttle looms and other machines show that the people of the province had accepted those time saving appliances leading to improved technology in handloom industry. But this effort of the government was not beneficial to all the people of Assam. It was advantageous for non-cultivating educated class or town dwellers. Those people who had adopted fly shuttle looms in a moment of impulse without earnest were not benefitted by fly shuttle looms for which criticism was to be heard. But it was the only subsidiary occupation without confinement within a class or castes.

According to the report of the Indian Banking Enquiry Committee it was the lack of interest taken by the government which led to the decline of traditional industry till 1921. But as a result of regulation of the government in 1921 some progress had been made in handloom industry.<sup>xxv</sup> In the Assam Valley, Sualkuchi in the Kamrup district was the only village where a large number of professional weavers were found. About 200 fly shuttle looms and 14 Jacquards were working in that village.<sup>xxvi</sup> By the year 1933-34 prevailing economic depression was expected to continue and the condition of the cultivators was made critical. Under such circumstances it was essentially necessary for them to find subsidiary occupation which might enable them to get some ready money for their urgent needs. Handloom weaving seemed to be the most suitable subsidiary

occupation for that along with sericulture.<sup>xxvii</sup> Even at the time of the World War II handloom industry made a good progress. The handloom parties continued their works as in the previous years. Moreover, with the introduction of dyeing and printing works, demand of the coloured and finished fabrics had been enhanced to a great extent in spite of the War.<sup>xxviii</sup> This gave an impetus to the handloom industry.

Having seen the scenario of handloom industry in colonial Assam, it may be considered that initially there was decline of traditional handloom industry. Technology was not improved up to earmark. But it was improved to a certain extent with the *swadehi* movement and its initiatives. But by the end of the second decade of twentieth century, technology had been improved to a great extent. During this period government undertook many initiatives for the purpose of improvement of handloom industry in Assam. Thus, it may be stated that handloom industry was in dark age with the advent of the colonial rule. But there was improvement of technology with the passage of time as the British undertook measures for handloom industry.

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