

Women Empowerment : With Special Reference to Mishing Tribal Weavers of Lakhimpur, In Assam

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Abstract - According to the Handloom Census Report 2009–10, Assam holds the top spot in terms of the distribution of handloom workers by state, accounting for 124100 homes, or 21.7 percent of all households in the state. The weaving culture, which has been practiced since the dawn of time, is an integral part of the tribal culture of North-east India, which is home to many different ethnic groups. The indigenous tribal community of Assam Mishing makes a substantial contribution to Assam's weaving culture, showcasing the artistic talent of the local women's population. A Mishing lady is likely to spend some time on her loom every day despite being busy with various household duties because it has always been a part of the Mishing culture. The traditional throw shuttle loom is built underneath the traditional stilt house. On handlooms, the women produce clothing, primarily for everyday usage. Additionally, they weave elegant items for special events. But nowadays, Mishing women also weave for commercial purposes. The social status gap between men and women, as well as the lack of education and resources among the women in the village, prohibit these gifted women from being successful company owners even though weaving and using handlooms can be lucrative and profitable ventures.

Index Terms - Handloom, Mishing Tribal Women, Women empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

In the country, there are 43.31 lakh handloom workers, of whom 36.33 lakh (84 percent) live in rural areas and 6.98 lakh (16 percent) in urban areas. The proportion of male workers (23%) is significantly lower than that of female employees (77%) among the adult population. Male handloom workers are concentrated in metropolitan regions at a considerably higher rate than female employees, who tend to live in rural areas (Dutta, 2015). Out of the total 27.83 lakh units engaged in the industry nationwide, 16.83 lakh

households (60.5 percent) are located in North-Eastern Indian states, according to the Handloom Census of India. 12.41 lakh (44.6 percent) of the world's handloom households are in Assam alone, compared to 1.79 lakh (6.4 percent) and 1.21 lakh (4.3 percent) in Manipur and Tripura, respectively (Economic Survey, Govt. of Assam, 2010-11). However, only 20 percent of the nation's overall production of handloom fabrics is produced in Northeast India, where 13.4 percent of the nation's commercial looms are located. According to the Handloom Census Report 2009–10, Assam holds the top spot in terms of the distribution of handloom workers by state, with 124100 families accounting for 21.7% of all households in the state. Out of the 28 lakh looms in the nation, Assam is the proud owner of more than 12 lakh looms, as was already reported. A total of 1403484 weavers were discovered working in this field in Assam in 2009–2010, of whom 147042 are full-time weavers and 1256442 are part-time weavers (Economic Survey, Govt. of Assam, 2010-11). The weaving culture, which has been practiced since the dawn of time, is an integral part of the tribal culture of North-east India, which is home to many different ethnic groups. Mising, an indigenous tribe in Assam, has a long history of weaving. A Mishing woman is likely to work on her loom every day, while being involved in a variety of domestic tasks during the day (Pegu *et al.*, 2020). Under the traditional stilt home, the throw shuttle loom is constructed. On handlooms, the women produce clothing, primarily for everyday usage. Their specialty is employing brilliant colors and weaving different themes that are influenced by nature, and this distinctive weaving technique of using colorful patterns on the traditional attires has given the Mishing people a name throughout Assam. Given that these women are already proficient at weaving, employment in the weaving industry could be a fantastic way to

empower them. All they require is encouragement and support (for finances and effective marketing) (from their male counterparts and the society). However, family arrangements are strongly based on patriarchal principles in the majority of tribal groups, and Mishing tribal society is no exception. The Mishing tribe is the second-largest ethnic group in Assam, historically known as the Miris. With a population approaching nearly one million they are scattered over the far eastern districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sib- sagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sonitpur. Kamrup Metropolis, Kamrup, Udalguri, Morigaon and Bon- gaigaon. One of Assam's indigenous groups, the Mishings, was originally a hill tribe from Northwest China, Tibet, and Mongolia around the eighth century, they moved to Arunachal Pradesh from Manasarovar, the world's highest freshwater lake and a revered pilgrimage destination thought to be the source of Asia's four greatest rivers (the Brahmaputra, Karnali, Indus, and Sutlej). In search of a less hostile, more prosperous life, they migrated to the Assam plains around 700 years ago or more via tributaries feeding into the Brahmaputra like the Dihing, Disang, Dikhow, Subansiri, Rangana- di, and Dikrong. However, as relatively latecomers discovered, the best lands had already been claimed. Therefore, they chose to settle on the fertile riverbanks, which also provided them with security from their adversaries. It is not surprising that many Mishings are skilled boaters and fishers given their long history of close ties to rivers; regrettably, though, some of the communities are being compelled to move away from the rivers due to soil erosion. As per the report of the Census of India, 2011, the population of the Misings in the State of Assam at the time of enumeration was 680,424 (Male- 345,786, Female- 334,638, Rural - 663,842, Urban - 16,582), which constitute 17.5 per cent of the total population of the total Schedule Tribes population of Assam (3,883,371).

The district wise population of the community is as follows (shown in brackets in descending order, ignoring the districts, where their population is shown as below 25): Dhemaji (220,024), Lakhimpur (197,886), Jorhat (102,270), Golaghat (53,028), Sonitpur (49,028), Sibasagar (27,834) , Tinsukia (18,145), Di- brugarh (9,285), Kamrup Metropolis (2,290), Nagaon (178) , Kamrup (125), Udalguri (67), Bongaigaon (52), and Morigaon (31). Numerically, the Misings are the second largest ST community in

Assam, the largest being the Bodos. They (Misings) constitute 17.52% of the total tribal population in Assam (680,424 Out of 3,884,371) (Taid, 2015). The Lakhimpur District is located on the north bank of the River Brahmaputra in Assam's northeastern portion. The district is located between 93°42 and 94°20 East longitude and 26°48 and 27°53 Northern latitude (approx.) The Arunachal Pradesh districts of Siang and Papumpare, as well as the Dhemaji District and the Subansiri River, encircle it in the north and east, respectively. Majuli District is located on the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra, and the Gohpur sub district of Biswanath District is located on the western bank. The District covers an area of 2277 Sqkm out of which 2257 Sqkm is rural and 20 Sqkm is urban. The Population as per Census of India, paper 1 of 2011 is 1042137 of which 529674 are male and 512463 are female. The handloom products made by Mishings are currently gaining popularity both inside and outside of the state. However, a number of obstacles have prevented the industry from growing its clientele especially in this area, and as a result these highly skilled weavers are unable to make weaving a living. A rudimentary attempt has been made through this paper to explore the issues that weavers face.

OBJECTIVE

1. To comprehend the position of Mishing women in their community, who make up the study's target group.
2. To comprehend how they view skill development and entrepreneurship as weavers.
3. To identify the key challenges faced by these women with respect to handloom weaving.

METHODOLOGY

The study work employs an empirical and analytical methodology, the study mostly relies on primary data, although secondary data was also gathered for a deeper analysis. Through in-person interviews using a carefully timed questionnaire, a total of 50 respondents were selected as sample respondents for this investigation, specifically drawn from the Balijan village in the Nowboicha block of district Lakhimpur, in Assam. Secondary data was gathered using both published and unpublished books.

DISCUSSION AND FINDING

The handloom sector is incredibly important to India's economy. After agriculture, it is the largest economic activity in terms of the number of workers it may employ. There are more than 31.44 lakh handlooms in the nation, which employ more than 43.32 lakh handloom weavers and ancillary workers, according to the Fourth National Handloom Census of Weavers and Allied Workers, 2019. Additionally, handloom weavers make up 90% of the families in the Northeastern Region (NER). The number of households engaged in handloom activities in India as a whole, up from just 27.83 lakhs in the third census, is now 31.45 lakhs, according to the Fourth All India Handloom Census. The numerous Assamese tribes have ties to this particular area. According to the most recent Handloom Census for all of India, more than 88 percent of weavers' households are located in rural areas, making up about 19 percent of all handloom weavers. Many tribal women choose to make their primary living from handloom weaving in addition to other economic pursuits (Pegu *et al.*, 2020). These weavers are highly worried about maintaining traditional handloom weaving because they believe that eventually the abilities needed to do so may vanish. In addition to this, there have been several other problems in this sector. One of the main downsides of this business as a whole is the economic crisis. Other significant drawbacks include severe rivalry from the power loom industry and changing consumer tastes. The handloom industry's internal issues, such as the weavers' failure to create novel goods, patterns, or production techniques that are more directed toward the market, are part of the reason for this.

FINDING

- Comprehending the position of Mishing women in their community:

Many sociologists start off with the premise that society's members are primarily in control of how people behave, as a result, cultural norms, values, and roles are influenced by members of society. According to this viewpoint, gender roles are more a result of culture than biology. The same is true of our study; it is obvious that women contribute significantly more to the work involved in raising a family than males do. The main source of income for the Mishing in the

village is agriculture, and women and men work in it equally throughout the year. Foods and apong are essential not only in daily life of Mishing people but also in religious gatherings in Keoliya (the dharma practiced by the majority of Mishing people) and they are only made by women. They must also complete all the tasks associated with the functions. The importance of women in the religious community may be seen in the fact that every religious ceremony requires the participation of women in one way or another. Despite the fact that they are not permitted to serve as priests, their participation in the ceremonies is crucial to their success. They frequently assist the priest in carrying out prayers and rituals. Their primary responsibility during religious rituals is to prepare food, cook Apong (rice beer), and serve the priests and other attendees. Thus, without the assistance or presence of women, even religious ceremonies would not be complete in Mishing society. Even though a girl child is initially sent to primary school, the Mishing parents place more emphasis on domestic labor than on education. Additionally, because agriculture is the Mishing people's primary industry, they are dependent on the whims of the harvests. The necessities of socio religious functions, timely crop production, and timely feeding of birds and animals are increasingly important concerns for the parents. Due to their long-standing social expectations, the mother is aware that her daughter will eventually play a position similar to her own. An education is not necessary for a housewife. Therefore, according to the majority of parents whose families were interviewed, investing in girls' education at the expense of resources and hard cash was a waste. Since boys traditionally live with and support their parents until the end of their lives, the respondents felt that boys' education was more important than girls. Girls, on the other hand, are free to leave their parents after marriage without feeling any obligation to provide for them. Therefore, parents have less concern for a girl's education. A wife's education is not vital for a home. This was the opinion expressed by the respondents in the interview, which included both men and women. The observations of J.Pangging (2020), H.K. Pegu (2010), and many others are consistent with these conclusions. Almost all socio-economic, religious, and cultural activities as well as decision-making are incomplete without the active and sincere cooperation of women. However, the role of Mishing women in family and social life

falls short of what might be expected given how much they have contributed across the board. Despite their significant contributions to the socio-economic and cultural growth of the Mishing civilization, women continue to be one of the most oppressed and exploited groups in the community. She typically has a position under her male counterpart and is accorded a lower standing in the family and society. She is far less capable of making decisions than men, both in her family and in society, and just a small number of them have these abilities. The increasing Aryanization of Mishing society after they moved from the hills to the A plains is probably to blame for the reduced status and position of women.



Fig 1: A Mishing woman busy in daily household chores



Fig 2: Mishing women busy in preparing pong for a ritual

- Comprehending how they view skill development and entrepreneurship as weavers.

As previously indicated, Mishing women have always been active not just in domestic duties but also in outdoor labor that provides for the family's livelihood. This shows that Mishing women have, in some capacity, been highly skilled and successful entrepreneurs. In addition to their work in agriculture, the Mishing's have a long legacy of weaving clothing for themselves, a custom that is upheld by the families in the hamlet. Weaving is necessary because, in

accordance with Mishing custom, ladies wear a typical traditional garment called Nisek after giving birth (a piece of cloth tied around the chest to lift a baby). Additionally, the Mishing community observes a variety of religious and cultural holidays where they are compelled to wear particular traditional clothing that is only available to them, regardless of age or sex (and weaved only by them). Mising handloom items, particularly its mekhela chador, gero, Mibu-Galog (male shirt), and scarves like gamosa and Muffler, are in high demand among other communities in and outside of Assam today. Traditionally, weaving in the Mising community was only done for personal use. Women in the survey admitted to selling a significant quantity of mekhela chadors to individuals from outside (relatives residing in towns and big cities and also other researchers and scholars visiting their villages). Due to home obligations and minimal profit, they have never considered expanding that into a full-fledged business, which again demonstrates their ignorance of the present market conditions and the potential of weaving as a business.



Fig 3: A Mishing Woman Busy Weaving



Fig 4: A Beautiful Mishing Traditional Attire (Ege Gasor) in a Hand Loom

- Identifying the key challenges faced by these women with respect to handloom weaving.

According to the results of the sample survey, Mishing women prioritize taking care of their families, and the community, which is predominately male, upholds traditional patriarchal ways of life, which signify a culture of power relationships that encourages men's supremacy and women's subjugation (Bhasin, 2007). As a result, these women lack confidence and are incapable of making decisions. As was already noted, these women are extremely accomplished weavers because weaving is a part of Mising heritage and culture. However, because of the society's entrenched policy of male chauvinism, they have never considered defying the status quo and being independent. The demand for handloom goods, particularly the traditional mekhela sador from Mishing, has grown significantly over the last few years. When it comes to generating income for these women, weaving and handloom have so much potential, and it's a surefire way to become an entrepreneur as well. However, this industry has experienced many operational issues as well, including the economic downturn, the weavers' inability to develop new products, designs, or market-oriented production, as well as stiff competition from the power loom industry. In addition to this, the current survey discovered that the majority of women were illiterate, which prevented them from being aware of current trends or knowing what their rights were. And as for weaving, despite the fact that these ladies were extremely talented and skillful, their ignorance of the opportunities and potential in the field in the near future prevented them from pursuing weaving as a full-time profession. Most women cited "Time and efforts in the traditional loom are more, and the earning is low, and dividing time between household chores and weaving is a herculean task" as their main objection to weaving, despite the fact that there is a high demand for these goods and that weavers are unable to meet it. As a result, their annual income plummets, making it impossible for them to rely solely on handloom. This blatantly demonstrates a lack of understanding, and the lack of consistency in their items' qualities, costs, and designs damages their reputation. Another significant problem still exists in the timely marketing of the products and consistent income flow to the weavers.

FINDING POSSIBLE SOLUTION:

It's long past time for a permanent shift in the Mishing people's conventional attitudes toward women's roles in society. These women require education to comprehend not only the value of entrepreneurship and skill development but also their own importance as people in society, so that they are ready to face problems in the future. As was already noted, these women are highly competent weavers because weaving is a part of Mising heritage and culture. As such, it is crucial to support these women and to provide regular payments to the weavers as well as timely marketing of the products. They should receive the necessary instruction to comprehend the market and current trends. A small amount of handloom weaving modernization is a required first step in gaining improved market access. The specialization and modernity of this industry will increase the demand for its goods, leading to an increase in Mishing weavers' production. This type of expansion will increase the market's size as well as the quality and sophistication of entrepreneurs. Another crucial stage for the development of this sector is banking inclusion and financial assessment of handloom weavers. The banking authority should provide the traditional weavers with financial support since it will raise their morale. When allocating money to these socially excluded groups, the government and relevant authorities should prioritize them. If they need a loan, they should be given interest-free credit or a credit concession, and the cumbersome loan application process should also be eliminated. Training & Skill Enhancement Program: A structured training facility is required for the development of handloom weaving. Government and non-government organizations should start a variety of programs for the craftsmen in order to manufacture quality products. By creating cooperative societies, marketing, raw material, and financial issues can be resolved. The creation of cooperative organizations is crucial for improving the socioeconomic circumstances of this excluded group. Stronger transportation and communication infrastructure is required to connect Assam's villages and other marketplaces, leading to development of market systems.

CONCLUSION

The current study found that, despite the fact that the women in the study are highly talented, skilled, and possess all the qualities necessary to become successful entrepreneurs with the right guidance and training, their social status prevents them from overcoming obstacles and establishing a name for themselves. The weaving industry has enormous potential, and Mishing women may be able to make good money with handlooms. These women must learn to build their own resilience. Over 90% of households in the entire North-Eastern region are engaged in handloom production. But in terms of socioeconomic advancement and the living conditions of the weavers, it is quite far behind. Regarding the current demographic of the study, where these ladies don't know their own potential, a lack of proper education might be highlighted as one of the main issues. The current study amply demonstrated that these women not only take a significant role in home duties but also actively engage in outdoor activities and consistently contribute to the family's income. In truth, women take care of the family more than men do, but tragically, their contributions are overlooked since they themselves think that men in society have an advantage over them. It's time to alter this way of thinking. Educating the girls about the many opportunities that a good education can provide for professions and futures should be encouraged by mothers. The lack of significant industrial investment under the preceding programs and the region's isolation could be the main causes of the weaving industry's backwardness in this area. Weaving can become a lucrative profession with the right and time-oriented efforts. It has been noted that traditional handloom products can have a significant chance of success through diversification and process modernization. It is essential to have a structured training facility if handloom weaving is to advance. Government and non-government organizations should start a variety of programs for the craftsmen in order to manufacture quality goods. To connect Assam's villages and other market centers, better transportation and communication infrastructure is crucial.

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Journal of Creative Research Thoughts,| Volume 8, Issue 7 July 2020 | ISSN: 2320-2882

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