Weaving as Livelihood for Weavers of Assam: Analysis of the Current Situation

If one look at the numbers that emerges from the North Eastern region regarding the presence of weavers and looms, then one can analyze the contribution that the region can make towards the handloom industry. According to the 2010 Handloom census, the North Eastern region of India alone has 27.8 lakh weavers' household which makes it 60% of the country's total weavers household. While there has been a record of decline in weaving households in other parts of the country, the region showed an increase from 14 lakh in the first handloom census to 15 lakh in the third handloom census. Despite such a number the region hasn't seen much development in the handloom sector and the weavers continue to be the country's lowest paid. This is true to the fact that the weavers still use the traditional methods to weave as compared to the modified looms their counterparts use in other parts of the country for mass production of textiles. In Assam there are about 14 lakh weavers of which 99 percent are women. The steeping completion made the weavers in the region redundant both in terms of speed and production.

The weavers mostly share time between farming, household chores and weaving. It is only at the space when she gets opportunity that the weaver sits for weaving. It is generally a group activity where women work in group during the initial warping process. The weavers weave for their domestic purpose and after that if she gets time she weaves for market or specific orders by individuals or business houses. There are various indications that have led to slower growth towards the handloom industry such as- market linkage, availability of technology, skill up gradation opportunities and the cultural aspects. It is in this endeavor that North East Network (NEN) had started their weaving projects- 'Saneki Weaves' for the weavers of Assam and 'Chizami Weaves' for the weavers of Nagaland to preserve the traditional looms and customary weaving practices thereby facilitating the weavers to make products at the comfort of their homes. The role of NEN as an Institution which is facilitating the weavers is described in a later section.

Households of Weavers

Weaving is Assam and other North-Eastern states are activities which mostly women perform. In Assam the knowledge of weaving usually gets transferred from mother to daughter and sometimes from female relatives and so the tradition continues. It is important for young girls to know weaving as it attached certain social status to a woman as she grows up. A girl in Assam is still expected to weave clothes for her husband and in-laws for her

marriage. There also used to be preference of girls who could master the art of weaving and the tradition still continues. However, despite having 15 lakh weavers in Assam and more than half of the weavers workforce in the region it fails to contribute significantly to the country's economy. At household level the weaving activities only contribute to about 19 percent to the family income as compare to the 58 percent is other States as per the handloom census 2010. However, the weavers work only part time in their looms in their leisure hours after all other chores are over.

Due to the low productivity and less income that gets generated from weaving the weavers are gradually moving from weaving to other occupation to generate income. We can see that there is drop from 13 lakh loom in 1995-96 to 11 lakh loom in 2009-10 as per the second and third handloom census. Women are mostly looking for jobs outside weaving due to the meager income that it provides. In order the increase the contribution in family income from weaving not only has the average working hours to be increased but also the support to the weavers has to be extended from both the Governmental and Non-Governmental Institutions.

Less Productivity

One of the reasons for low productivity is due to the nature of work pattern according to Ch. Victoria Devi. As mentioned earlier the work of the women is largely dominated by the production of products for the household in the leisure time that she weaves. According to Devi there is also preference of the general public to view the handloom work as 'cultural accomplishment' rather than of commercial value. There are also lack of enhanced handloom technologies and marketing options available to the weavers of the region. The National Handloom Policy though gives opportunities to the weavers to market their products but these openings usually do not reach every weaver and mostly the affluent business houses from the urban areas take away the resources given by the Government. In the recent times more and more production houses in the region have started employing male weaves from States such as from West Bengal and Odisha thereby leading the flow of income to outside the region. There is also shortage of proper infrastructure for weavers both at the individual household level and at community level. Often times the loom is kept in places, due to unavailability of space, which is exposed to rain and flood which has the potential to impact both the loom and the products being woven. Also it has been mostly observed that the weavers work only during the day time due to poor lighting at homes or total lack of electric connection in the loom area. Many of the weavers who work at home at night at low voltage

sprain their eyes. Therefore, there should be vigorous efforts from the Government and Non-Governments Institutions to not only provide infrastructure but also capacitate the weavers by providing options to take us weaving as a full time profession and facilitating platform to sell their products in national as well as international market. There should also be efforts to modernize the looms and other amenities that help the weaver to push high productivity in a less amount of time.

Another reason for low productivity in the State is because women find it difficult to take weaving as a full-time profession as compared to the professional weavers who are men in Other States. Women weavers most of the time are burdened with household chores while men weavers are freed of such burden by their families and are free to engage in weaving activities thereby increasing their productivity. Even if a woman from the North-Eastern region gets a large personal order she is still bound to complete her household duty at first and then give her time in producing the products.

Handloom Policy in Assam

The Assam Government introduced Handloom Weaver's Cooperative Societies through its Assam Cooperative Societies Act, 1949. The Act provided working structure for three tier of cooperative system- i. Apex level Society, ii. Regional level/District level Society, iii. Primary Weavers Cooperative Society. The Assam Apex Weavers and Artisans Cooperative Federation Limited (ARTFED) at the Apex level provides yarn to the Primary Cooperative Societies and procure the finished products for the established show rooms and provide opportunity for the weavers to participate in the exhibitions. ARTFED is also responsible for the implementation of schemes and promote the products of the weavers. At the intermediary level the Regional and District level Societies also has a similar role to that of the Apex body however their jurisdiction is only limited to the defied region and districts. As per the Handloom Policy of Assam there are about 4000 Primary Weavers Cooperative Society in Assam at present. However, there are inadequacies in terms of implementation of the policy across all the weaving community as at present only 30% of all the weavers are members of Cooperative Societies at the Primary level. Therefore, more number of weavers in Assam is outside the frame of the cooperative societies as compared to the weavers who are part of the cooperative Societies.

Weaving being considered as a household level occupation it automatically gets ascribed as a part of the life of women. Therefore, it is hardly seen as a developmental concern. And the

presence of various verticals under the Handloom Departments makes it rather confusing for the benefits to be received. Also, even though there is a large presence of handloom workers in the rural area of the North East there hardly is any information center for the weavers. Most of the time the only benefit that the weaver receives is getting free yarn distributed. There should also be protective measure given to the handloom and other traditional looms against the onslaught of power looms. There should be promotion of hand woven products by the concerned Institutions along with marketing opportunities. Financial assistance should be made available to the weavers to boost their productivity along with the guarantee that their products would be given platform to be sold.

The Work of North East Network

North East Network is a rights based organisation which follows a decentralised home based model of production for their weaving projects. This enables flexible working hours for the weavers to weave at home as they are also seasonally involved with agriculture and poultry. Through its weaving activities NEN has also been trying to address the migration issues of young girls to nearby cities and States in search of livelihoods. Weaving as a livelihood activity not only promotes and preserves the handloom/back strap loom as a heritage but also provides young women the option to work at the comfort of their home instead of working at cities and towns for a meagre salary or sometimes in hazardous activities. It is with the women weavers that the NEN team discussed and decided on the wages per product which is comparable to competitive market rates. The weavers are given trainings on design and product development.

Capacity Building of the weavers

There are huge gaps in terms of implementation of the overall development policies to the weavers such as- low availability of raw material, trainings on product diversification and market linkage. To mitigate such gaps NEN started sourcing good quality yarn and started giving women weavers skill- up gradation trainings on different products which are compatible to market demands. The weavers are monitored on the quality of their work on timely basis so improve the product quality. There is also focus on product innovation while using traditional motifs and designs. The weavers are also trained in inventory and stock management of goods received and goods sold. NEN makes sure that the women not necessarily just weave but become a part of the overall management system. They are also capacitated on leadership and collectivization skills so that they become self-reliant in the

long run and be able to function as collectives to make. Today NEN has started working with various communities across different Districts of Assam to revive and boost the tradition and craftsmanship of the weavers.

Conclusion

We can observe that there is growing interest among the people towards handloom woven organic products. These interests are sensed by entrepreneurs and hobbyists today who are staring to open up their own boutiques and showrooms at the urban locations. However, these kinds of activities are mostly limited to the urban entrepreneurs and urban areas who have accessible to finances and other resource. Such aspirations are often outside the purview of the rural weavers who weave to clothe themselves and generate livelihood to sustain their family rather than nurturing it as a hobby. With 14 Lakh weavers in Assam State alone it won't be an easy task for the Government to get all the weavers under the cooperatives. Therefore, in an effort to keep the heritage alive the various civil society organisations are coming up to support the weavers to cater to the market demand of handloom woven products as well as help preserve the age old traditional weaving practices. And North East Network through its continuous effort is trying its best to sustain the means of the weavers by supporting them through providing yarn, skill up gradation trainings and market-linkage. At the same time the organisation is trying to make the weavers self-reliant so that they can act as independent collectives gradually for the weaving craftsmanship to continue.

Photo Gallery of Saneki's work

The products have been produce by the weavers who work with Saneki Weaves in various districts of Assam

References

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